

1995

# Cold water

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Cold water

by

Peter David Fadness

A Thesis Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS

Department: English  
Major: English (Creative Writing)

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Signatures have been redacted for privacy

Iowa State University  
Ames, Iowa

1995

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## KILL THEM ALL

Ninth grade and I was still waiting for a growth spurt to hit. I was the smallest guy in my class. I was also probably the skinniest. My mom said I was too hyper. My dad said it was my metabolism. Whatever the hell it was I decided there wasn't any point in going out for football. I had played C team and it was pretty ridiculous. Besides never playing, whenever I wore the stupid helmet and pads I looked like something left in the dryer too long. Not being out for football put me in the same world people like Larry Himmelman inhabited. Nerd world.

Larry was fat and he smelled bad. I hung around him once in awhile, but I tried to keep it a secret. Larry was mayor of nerdville. The only reason I saw him at all was because he had twice as many comic books as me. He glommed onto me as soon as he found out I would be joining the nerd roster.

"Aw Phil, Football players are idiots, anyway," he said to me one day after school. We were on our way to the drugstore, the only place in town you could buy comics.

"Yeah, I know. It just feels weird to see everybody else out."

Larry shrugged and I guess it wouldn't seem weird to him.

It wouldn't have been so bad if the town hadn't been so small. A thousand people in all, fifty in my class. You didn't get to choose your friends.

"Now you can spend more time on your comic," he said trying to cheer me up. "When can I see it?"

"When it's done."

"That'll be never."

We checked out the comics, saw nothing new and headed home. Larry invited me over, but I declined. To get there we would have to walk by the football field and I didn't want all the guys at practice to see me going to Larry's place.

\* \* \*

When I got home mom asked me to rake the lawn. She was peeling some potatoes over the sink. The air in the kitchen was hot and steamy from boiling water. I hemmed and hawed, but I could tell she wasn't in the mood so I went out and did it. While I was raking dad came home.

"You got an A on your quiz today," he said.

"Of course," I said, leaning on the rake. "Your class is easy."

He went into the house and yelled he was home. His class *was* easy and it wasn't like I cheated by looking at the tests he brought home.

My dad was not only my history teacher, he was also the school principal. He was one of those hippie teachers--that was what he said the school board called him. He wasn't big into grades so he had a tendency to give a lot of A's. Naturally, this made him popular among the students.

What didn't make him so popular was his other job. He had to do a lot of disciplining and he didn't like doing it. Already this year I'd seen him have a run-in with Randy Kingston and Troy Beulah--two badass seniors. They lit newspapers on fire in the bathroom making the fire alarms go off and sending everyone outside. My dad suspended them. What was weird was seeing my

dad in that position. There was a big crowd standing around when he gave it to Randy and Troy and I saw more than a couple people look at me.

Not long after this Jana Jameson, a senior and Troy's girlfriend pushed me into a locker when she passed me in the hallway. Jana was a big solid girl and there was a rumor circulating she was going to play football this year.

"You're dad's an asshole," she said as I bounced off the lockers.

It wasn't embarrassing to get pushed around by a girl as long as it was Jana. Still, I ducked my head and moved on hoping no one noticed.

This was my first year in high school, my dad's domain, and suddenly he was the enemy.

I had the leaves in a pile by the time he came back out having changed into a sweatshirt and jeans. He seemed young to me dressed that way and I guess he really wasn't old. He had dark brown hair, like mine, parted on the side; glasses, a big nose. Mom called him skinny and said I would probably be skinny too and weren't we lucky. I didn't think so.

"You're going to have a new friend," he said opening a trash bag so we could scoop the leaves in.

"Oh yeah?"

"There's a new boy coming into your class. He's starting next Monday."

"Great, a new kid. Probably some geek."

"I don't think so. I met him this week with his mom and two brothers. He seems like a nice kid."

"Hey, wait a minute. Is it that black kid?" I'd seen a black family walking around school the other day. That was something you noticed since there wasn't a black kid in the entire school district.

"His name is Telly."

"What's a black kid doing here?"

My dad jiggled the bag so the leaves would settle.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I don't know. Just seems weird. Guess I better watch my nigger jokes."

He grabbed the rake from me, pissed off all of a sudden.

"Don't ever say that word again," he said. His eyes had a way of blinking when he was pissed off.

"Everybody says it."

He pointed at me, in principal mode. It was something I was starting to notice--the way he sometimes talked to me the same way he did when he put somebody on detention. "Not you, got me? You'll be in serious trouble if I ever hear you say that again."

There was a long silence and he was staring me down; blink, blink.

I tried to shrug it off, "Cool out, dad."

He gave me the rake. "Telly has had a hard time of it. His dad died a couple of years ago and now they've moved so his mom can enter the nursing program at UWL. I don't think they need to come here and have names hurled at them."

We finished the job without saying another word.

\* \* \*

Later, I worked on my comic. It was about a serial killer with the ability to magically appear or disappear wherever and whenever he wanted. I drew it out on some illustration board my mom got me. I had plans on becoming an artist. Maybe doing my own comic book.

My killer didn't have a name and he never talked. Usually I drew his face as a shadow except for his mouth when I wanted him to smile and seem especially evil. There wasn't much plot involved. I had him walking the halls of a high school in the middle of the night, slaying the poor students that were (for some reason) still in the building. He used a large knife.

My favorite part was when he had one of the students cornered and before hacking away, he pointed a long bony finger at them. This really freaked them out because they knew it was all over.

My hero was a muscle-bound guy named Bud Richards. He was the smartest and most popular guy in the school. Everybody took orders from Bud.

I called it, "Death Goes to School."

\* \* \*

The next day in school, Thursday, Telly was the news. You could tell people had a hard time not staring at him. He had really dark skin and black tightly curled hair. His nose was broad and flat and his lips were thick. The skin around his fingers and palms was lighter than any other place.

"Probably wore the skin off from chokin' his chicken too much," Mick Kolehouse said at lunch. Mick was in my grade, and turning into a football stud. He was playing quarterback for the junior varsity. It was funny because he used to be this slow, pudgy kid. Now it seemed like he had grown a new pair of shoulders and arms overnight. His new muscles made him popular.

I tried for a laugh saying that at least if the power went out all Telly would have to do is smile so people could find him.



The lunch room was what had once been the school's gym. The squeaky hardwood floor was marked out with the lines for basketball and volleyball. The students' clang and clatter reverberated off the cement walls. The seniors sat in the back corner with the juniors and sophomores spread around them. The freshman were stuck with the tables nearest the trashcans. It wasn't unusual, during the first month or so of school, for the freshman to get bombarded with food from all sides.

"I wonder if he plays ball," Mick said, glancing over his shoulder at Telly sitting alone a table away.

I usually sat with Mick and the other guys during lunch--although I was really beginning to feel like an outsider with all the talk turning to football. There were other places to sit, but I'd always hung out with these guys. The freshman had three long tables broken up into the jocks, the girls, and the freaks. The freaks were nerds like Larry Himmelman, Stu Norberts, Ralph Heines, and losers like Danny Sloan or Kasey Hahn--guys that snuck outside during lunch to have a smoke. The uglier, nerdier girls sat at this table too. It was like a spillover table.

Ronnie Hawkins, acne king, said, "All of them play ball."

"Yeah," said Ryan Olson. "My dad says all of them blacks are natural sports players." He looked around at everyone, a stupid grin on his face--"farm boy" written all over it.

"He probably plays quarterback," I said to Mick.

Mick, who had just had his red hair cut to a stubble, crossed his eyes.

"Oh, I'm really scared," he snorted. "He's probably not smart enough."

I had a comeback, but I held it in.

I don't think anybody talked to Telly that day and the only word I heard him say were "here" when he answered role.

\* \* \*

After school my dad asked me if I'd made friends with Telly yet.

"Dad, he's only been here a day."

I still sat in my desk from class. He was wiping the chalkboard clean.

"So what? He's new. It's going to be hard for him to meet new kids."

I doodled on my notebook. I started drawing a picture of a hand with the middle finger extended.

He turned around to face me.

"Besides, I already set it up. You're going to meet with him at the end of the week."

"What do you mean?"

"I talked to him today and told him you'd be willing to help him catch up in the classes you both share."

I slammed my pen down and said, "Oh great."

He put his hands on his hips. "What is wrong with that?"

"Dad, why you gotta' get me involved in everything? Why can't you just leave me alone?" I turned my head and looked at the lawn outside. "I don't want people to see me hanging around that new guy."

"Why not?"

I looked at him and it was a big stare down. Here we go, I thought. Big badass principal again. He was waiting for me to say something about Telly being black so he could lecture me again. I was tempted to yell, "Nigger!" just to see what'd he do. Or: "Ship 'em all back to Africa!" He'd love that.

Instead, I picked up my books and stormed out.

\* \* \*

On Friday all the football players wore their jerseys to school. In first period, Math, they filed in, their names in big block letters on the back. We'd never had that in C team. I looked over at Larry and he made a disgusted face. I wasn't disgusted. I was envious. It was the first game of the season and the jerseys were bright red and their smell, like the smell of a new car, filled the room. The guys all had grins they were trying to hold back. Some of the girls giggled to each other behind their hands. That was the thing. All the girls fell for that shit. Even Rachel Bellens, the smartest and prettiest girl in our class, the one everybody lusted after, reached out and felt Brad Warren's sleeve. Goddamn Brad. He was the smallest guy in school. After me.

I felt it in the pit of my stomach: This was the end. I might as well start wearing high-water pants or glasses with tape in the middle.

For lunch I decided to skip the lunch room spectacle of all those red jerseys and went down to my dad's room. I told him why I was depressed.

"You're making too big a deal out of it."

"Dad, sports is everything around here. Nobody cares if you're smart or not. It's if your fast, or strong, or the quarterback."

He leaned back in his creaky chair and he took off his glasses.

"Plus, everybody hates me because of you." I knew that wasn't exactly true, but I was still pissed at him about the whole Telly thing.

He grimaced and rubbed at the marks on his nose. "We've talked about this. When we're at school, I'm the principal." He held out his arms and shrugged. "I can't help that."

"It just sucks. I always end up having to do stuff nobody else has to." I was thinking of Telly.

"Well," he put his glasses back on, "when you're older and living on your own you won't have to listen to me."

I thought maybe he would try to make me feel better, but he didn't. He was doing just the opposite. I knew if I said, "It isn't fair," he'd say "Life isn't fair." That was where we were at and it was pretty goddamn frustrating.

\* \* \*

In my comic, The Cutter, as I was beginning to call him, was about to get Bud's girlfriend. In the frame before, I had her running down the hall. The next one was going to be The Cutter's hand coming out of a locker and grabbing her around the neck.

Bud's girl was supposed to be pretty, but it was hard for me to draw her that way. Originally I tried to model her after Rachel Bellens, but it didn't look anything like her. The only thing that differentiated my men from women was the long hair and the two lumps on their chest which were supposed to be boobs. I thought about having The Cutter rip her blouse off or something before he kills her, but I'd never tried to draw nude people before.

This was going to piss Bud off because he'd find her body stuffed in his locker. After being freaked out and maybe crying a little, he'd want revenge.

I tried to think of a clever way he could kill The Cutter.

My dad came into the room as I was drawing.

"What do you have there?" he said leaning over my shoulder.

I crossed my arms over it so he couldn't see.

"Nothing," I said.

He stepped back and smiled. "Phil, I think your passion for art is wonderful. That'll take you more places than football ever will." I looked back at him and he gave me an encouraging nod. "Using your imagination."

I nodded my head and said, "Uh-huh," like he was absolutely right. He left and as he did it occurred to me he had come in to try and cheer me up. I looked back down at my comic where The Cutter was about to slash through the girl's fuzzy sweater.

\* \* \*

Up at the front of the room my dad droned on about the Louisiana Purchase. Telly sat next to me and I knew if I didn't talk to him before school ended my dad was going to give me the third degree again.

He had his head on his arms with his eyes closed. His hair was shaved close to his head and I felt like reaching out and touching it to see what it felt like. It looked soft as cotton.

"Hey," I whispered to him. He opened his eyes and looked at me. "Don't fall asleep in class. It pisses him off." I jerked my head towards the front of the room.

Telly sat up and looked at my dad. Then he looked at me.

"Your dad?"

"Yeah."

He nodded his head.

I leaned forward, closer to him. "My dad said we're supposed to go over some history together. But we don't have to if you don't want."

He shrugged. "Whatever."

I shrugged too, and sat back in my chair waiting for class to end. I caught Ronnie Hawkins staring at me. He pointed to Telly then me and made a kissing noise with his lips. A couple people glanced at him.

I was going to flip him the bird, but my dad looked our way to see what the disturbance was.

The bell rang and everybody got up. Telly, with his books in hand said, "Well, maybe I'll see you later."

"All right." I didn't look at him. I didn't want people to think I was talking to him.

He looked back at me as he left and I don't know what it was, I felt a little like a jerk.

When everybody cleared out I told my dad I talked to Telly.

"Good," he said. "You'll be going out there this Sunday."

"Going where?"

"Out to the Johnson's. I've already talked to his mom and they're expecting you." He shuffled some papers around on his desk.

My stomach dropped. I'd be surrounded by complete strangers, not to mention black strangers. I wondered if my dad considered that he was putting me in danger. All the way home all I could picture was acne king Ronnie Hawkins blowing me that kiss.

\* \* \*

Sunday my dad drove me out to Telly's. They lived two miles outside of town in a campground that was also a trailer park. It was called Silver Creek because a small stream ran through it and fed a pond people swam in during the summer. Mick Kolehhouse and his dad lived in a trailer out here. So did

Randy Kingston. I'd heard someone say it was the sight of a lot of parties. Not that I was ever invited to any.

My mom said it was mainly poor people who lived out there.

The Johnson's trailer was at the bottom of a small hill. A tree served as a canopy over one end of it. Mrs. Johnson sat in a lawn chair smoking a cigarette and waved at us.

Dad said, "I'll pick you up around four."

I hoped my face looked like the face of a man on death row pleading with the governor for a reprieve. What if they were cannibals with a taste for white meat?

My dad appeared unmoved. His face wore the look of an impatient, "Well?"

I got out and he took off. I walked towards the trailer stopping in front of Mrs. Johnson.

"I really appreciate this Phil," she said in a quiet, almost southern voice. She looked old. She wore large square glasses and had her hair pulled back into a bun.

I think I said something like, "No problem."

"The move has been hard on Telly," she said still sitting. "After his father died I decided to move rather suddenly." She tapped some ash from her cigarette off to the side of her chair. There were hills around us and she looked up into them. The sound of a TV came from inside the trailer. "It's not easy to stay in a place where your life was all of one way for so long and then it changes. You can't stay in that place." She looked at me and smiled a little. "I couldn't, anyway."

I nodded feeling awkward at this sudden intimacy.

She lead me into the trailer and there were boxes lying around yet to be unpacked. Two smaller boys sat inside watching television. They both turned and looked at me.

"This is Josh," she said gesturing towards the littler one. He looked like he might be in kindergarten. "And this is Graham." Graham had the sleepest eyes I'd ever seen on a kid. They wanted to slide right off his face which appeared to be fixed in an expression of tired boredom.

Telly's room was at the very back of the trailer. He was on his bed reading a comic book. He didn't say anything when his mom let me into the room.

I'm not sure why, but I was surprised he read comics. After his mom shut the door I asked him what he was reading.

"Fantastic Four," he said without looking up.

I nodded and looked around his room. It was tiny. There was just enough room for the bed and a little floor space. He had a night stand, but that was it. The walls, like the rest of the trailer, were a fake wood paneling. He had tried to cover them up with various posters. Some were of comic book heroes like the Hulk.

"I don't have any chairs," he said. "We can sit on the floor if you want."

"Okay."

We sat at on the carpet our backs against the foot of the bed. I had a folder with some notes and old quizzes my dad thought I should show him.

"Hulk's the best," he said seeing me look at the poster again.

I shook my head. "Daredevil."



"Yeah, he's cool. I've got this one where Daredevil and Hulk fight. Want to see it?"

"All right."

Telly sprang to his feet and went over to the closet. There were stacks of comics piled on the floor in there. I sat up on the bed.

He got the comic and we looked at it together.

"They fight," he said, "but nobody really wins."

He brought out a whole stack of comics and we began paging through them. When I first came into his room I felt some tension, the tension you always feel when you're alone with someone you both know you're expected to interact with, but you don't know how. That faded as we argued over who were the best characters, who were the best artists. We both hated Superman. Me because he was too powerful and Telly because he was too white.

During a silence he asked me, "Hey, how come you're not out for football?"

It caught me off guard and for a minute I thought about coming up with some lie--maybe a horrible injury. I didn't want him to think I was a weakling. In the end I just said, "I don't like football."

"Yeah, Coach Benson is trying to talk me into it. My mom thinks it would be a good idea. She figures I'd make more friends that way. My dad was a good football player."

I didn't say anything. I was curious how his dad died. There was a picture on the night stand that must have been his dad. It was black and white and in it he wore some kind of military uniform

"To tell the truth, I don't like football much," he said. "It's not my sport."

"You like basketball?"

He stared at me a moment then shook his head. "Wrestling. I guess you figure because I'm black, I play, huh?"

Embarrassed, I fidgeted a little and managed a shrug.

"My friends back in Ohio said all of you would be rednecks. I don't suppose you got many black folks around here, do you?"

"Not really," I admitted. He didn't sound mad. "I think there are some over in Lacrosse."

"You ever been around black people?"

"No. We've got cable though, and sometimes I watch Soul Train."

He stared at me for a second and then burst into laughter. I started laughing too. I wasn't trying to be funny, but after we started laughing I could see why it was.

"I mean," he said after sobering up, "there aren't hardly any black super heroes, even."

"What about the Black Panther?"

"Give me a break. He doesn't even have his own book. What others can you name?"

I thought about it and had to admit he was right. It occurred to me that was maybe why he liked The Hulk. The Hulk was green, at least. I tried to imagine what it would be like if Spider man was black. Or Batman. If I were Telly maybe I wouldn't read comics at all.

After a while we grew restless in his little room and went outside to walk around the campground. I pointed out where I thought Mick lived.

"Yeah, I know who that is," Telly said. "I see him driving around on a three wheeler."

We were standing on a little rise and had a good view of the entire camp. It was cool, but not cold and the sky was a bland gray. The few trailers we could see looked pale and washed out. The pond below us was dark and scummy, leaves covered its surface. I pointed to it.

"It'll be nice out here in the summer," I said. "You'll get to go swimming whenever you want. Do you swim?"

"Nah. Looks like there's some animal living in there, anyway."

"Yeah, it's better if you don't. There's a lot of water moccasins around here."

"What?"

"You know, snakes."

Telly raised his eyebrows.

"They leave you alone if you don't bother them. They like that pond. When it gets cold though, some people find them in their trailers."

Telly leaned back. "Get the fuck out of here."

I laughed and said, "Just kidding. You should have seen your face."

"Probably got as white as yours."

He shivered. "I hate snakes."

We were called back by my dad honking the horn.

I turned and began back-pedaling towards the trailer. "I'll see you in school," I said to him.

"Okay."

In the car my dad asked how it went, if we'd gotten much studying done.

"Yeah," I lied. "Dad, would you say this is pretty much a redneck town?"

"Redneck?" He pursed his lips. "I wouldn't say redneck. Conservative, maybe. Why?"

"Just wondering."

\* \* \*

It wasn't like Telly and I were suddenly big buddies. The next day, when I saw him in school, we gave each other cool nods and maybe I talked to him a little more than usual. We didn't sit next to each other at lunch. I still sat at the regular table with Mick and the other guys and I guess Telly didn't feel comfortable to join us. He remained at the spillover table next to Larry Himmelman.

Later, after school, while we were standing in the hall and people were bustling about around us, Telly told me he was going out for football.

"Do you think it's a dumb idea?" he asked me.

He was on his way to his first practice and he bounced from foot to foot nervously.

I shrugged and didn't say anything. I wished he wasn't going out.

"I mean at least I'll be wearing pads if these rednecks want to come after me."

He laughed and so did I. By his comment I understood him to mean I was not a redneck.

Later in the week, amidst the clamor of lunch, I heard Telly's football prowess take a beating.

"I can't believe how much he sucks," Mick Kolehouse was saying.

"Worst pair of hands I've ever seen," Ryan confirmed.

"And then," Mick said, "in the locker room he's telling me about his girlfriend back home and I'm like, 'Yeah, right.'"

"I bet she's a beauty," Ryan said.

"He showed me her picture," I lied. They looked at me. "She looked like the women in National Geographic."

Everybody laughed and even though it was the reaction I wanted, as soon as I looked over at Telly eating, I felt the laughter die on my face. I stared down at my plate feeling guilty. I thought of him standing in the hallway telling me he was going out for football. He had been afraid. In the background I heard Mick say something like "banging the drums," and more laughter.

Suddenly Ronnie, who had been conspicuously missing, appeared. His face was flushed and his eyes were pinched and mean looking.

"What's up, Hawk?" Mick said to him.

"That asshole's father just gave me detention," he said looking at me.

I didn't say anything, but I felt everybody else looking at me too.

"What'd you do?" asked Ryan.

"Nothin'." He glanced at Mick and Ryan. "He just doesn't like me."

I knew he was full of shit. Ryan had to have done something. But sitting there and arguing was just going to make me even more unpopular. It seemed the best thing I could do was leave. Which is what I did.

I didn't realize it, but as I left Telly was right behind me. He tapped me on the shoulder as I dumped the remains of my lunch into the trash.

"Hey Phil, you want to come out again this weekend? I thought maybe we could fish that pond for some snakes or something."

It was almost like the words I had said about him were still in the air and I was expecting him to react to them. But he was just smiling.

"This weekend?" I asked, stalling.

"Yeah. I don't know. I just thought we could shoot the shit or something. Tell your dad you're going to teach me some more history so he'll drive you out."

"Sure," I said, managing to smile.

\* \* \*

I figured it was about time for the big showdown between The Cutter and Bud. It was going to take place in the gym and I had a couple of guys with Bud who would get killed off first. One of them was this real geek who was the smart guy of the story. In the science room of the high school he and Bud had developed an acid which they were going to throw in The Cutter's face. It was the only weapon they had.

The geek died by getting impaled on a javelin The Cutter found in the athletic supply room, but not before he managed to spill a little acid on The Cutter's hand. I drew a frame of him holding his smoking hand and baring his grisly teeth. He was furious.

Bud had the only vial of acid left.

\* \* \*

When I showed up at Telly's on Sunday I brought "Death Goes to School" with me.

"This is really cool," he said.

We were lying on his bed with the illustration boards fanned out in front of us. I could tell he really liked it and it made me feel good.

After he was done reading it he asked, "How are you gonna' end it?"

"Bud's going to fight him and in the process unmask him. It'll turn out to be the school principal." I had to laugh thinking of my dad getting a load of that.

"Cool. Hey, I saw your dad at the junior varsity game the other night. Were you there?"

"No." I wasn't planning on going to any of the games. I didn't like the idea of seeing other kids' parents there staring at me and wondering why *I* wasn't suited up.

"We got killed. It's all right though. Nobody's giving me any shit for being out like I thought they might."

"That's good," I said thinking of my conversation with Mick and Ryan.

"I'm not very good. Not like my dad was, I guess. My mom says he was All Conference in high school." He looked over at the picture on his night stand. "I'll never be *that* good. Still, I wish he could see me."

He stopped and I waited, afraid he might go into the death of his dad. I didn't want him to do that because I wouldn't know how to respond.

"Hey, you know what?" He bounced up onto his knees. "We should do a comic together."

I wasn't crazy about the idea, but I was relieved at the change of topic.

"You could do all the drawing," he said, "but we could both write it."

"What do you want to do?"

"How about a black superhero?"

I almost laughed, but didn't because I saw he was serious. I wanted to say I thought there would be technical problems since I didn't know how to

draw black people. Besides, I was pretty private about my art. I didn't think I would be a good collaborator.

"We could have two superheroes," he said. "One black and one white."

"Okay," I said laughing and seeing how fired up he was. "Sure."

During the next two weeks we hung out a lot more. At lunch we sat together and the first couple days I was uncomfortable imagining other people watching us and saying things. It didn't help that Larry was with us a lot of the time. Usually we talked about our comic or comics in general. We were having trouble agreeing on what our superheroes should be. I wanted them to be super badass ninja warriors while Telly went for the straight superhero stuff; super strength or super speed. Larry said ESP, but we just waved him off.

One advantage of sitting at that table was it was closer to the girls' table and sometimes I had a pretty good view of Rachel eating. It was something I looked forward to and I was disappointed whenever her back was turned to me. Telly noticed my interest one day and he glanced over his shoulder to see who I was looking at.

"Hey, hey, hey," he said with a smirk.

"Nah," I said turning my attention back to my lunch.

He shrugged and began talking about whatever it was he'd been saying before. I was relieved somewhat. I didn't see any way Rachel would be interested in me and I didn't want to feel foolish by constantly being teased. But Telly kept quiet and if he saw me watching her on other occasions he let the chance to give me crap go by.



On game days, he was the only player who didn't sit with the team at lunch. He didn't seem to care or even notice. In some ways Telly disproved my theory of popularity. Even though he was out for football not many of the other guys talked to him that much. I figured it was because he was black, though, so I wasn't sure if it really counted.

One weekend we finally agreed I would write the dialogue for the white guy and Telly would do the black guy. I set aside "Death Goes to School" and actually got one page sketched out for our comic. We came to the compromise my guy would be a ninja while his would be more like a regular superhero. Telly had some ideas about where the story could go, but we didn't get any further than that.

Thinking back on it, I think I remember knowing something was wrong just by the way my dad was talking on the phone. It was Monday night and I was reading in bed. After he hung up I heard him walking towards my bedroom door. He came in and sat down at the end of my bed.

"Telly stabbed Mick Kolehouse," he said quietly, rubbing his chin.

"What?" I sat up in bed.

"Mick's over at St. Mary's in Lacrosse. Evidently it isn't too serious. Just some stitches."

I felt a shiver go through me. I had just been with Telly yesterday.

"What happened?"

"I don't know. Superintendent Calhoon just called me. No one but Mick and Telly seems to know. Evidently it happened out at the campground some

time this evening. Telly's in custody right now. I'm going to go down there and talk to his mother."

It didn't make any sense to me. Why would Telly stab Mick? And then I knew it had to be Mick. Mick must have done something.

After my dad left I didn't even bother to try and sleep. I got out of bed and paced around. Where did Telly get a knife? How did they even run into each other? For some reason I pictured them together on the hill Telly and I had stood upon that first time looking down at the pond. I could imagine them there crouched against one another, looks of hatred on their faces. Maybe they had wrestled around on the ground. Mick pulls the knife on Telly, but somehow he's the one who gets stabbed. Maybe he rolls over it or something. But how would it start? Mick taunting Telly? Calling him names? It was weird to me that he would do it alone and not when he was with a group of guys. The fact they were alone made it seem more personal and dangerous in some way.

I waited until one in the morning for my dad to come home. I thought about picking up the phone and calling someone, but I didn't know who would know anything. My mom waited up with me, but we didn't talk. We turned the TV on and watched it wordlessly.

I thought about how well I knew Telly. I still didn't know how his dad had died or ever heard about any girlfriend back home. What was there between us besides comic books? I tried to determine if I actually liked Telly. It was weird because when I thought of it that way I had to figure out why I like any of my friends. But I did like Telly. I felt relaxed around him. I liked hanging out with him on weekends.

We heard dad come through the door. He walked into the kitchen, shrugged off his coat and said, "Well, nobody knows. Luckily it wasn't very serious. Mick is already home. He had to have ten stitches along his leg."

"Did you see Telly?" I asked.

"No, but I saw his mother. Naturally, she was upset. She said that Telly said it was an accident, and whatever happened, the Kolehouses aren't pressing charges."

We all sat down at the kitchen table.

"It must have been Mick," I said.

"We don't know that," dad said.

"What's going to happen to Telly?" my mother asked.

Dad took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "She's talking about sending him to school in Lacrosse."

"Why?" I asked.

"She's afraid of what people might think. In some ways Telly did what people around here would expect."

"But he probably didn't even do anything."

"You don't know that. Don't try to judge this. Quit jumping to conclusions."

I looked at him incredulously. It seemed to me he was being Mr. High School Principal again, standing there and lecturing some student. It made me furious.

"You're the one judging," I yelled at him. "How the hell do you know?"

"Sit down," he said.

"No," I stared down at him, but he wasn't looking at me. He was looking at the glasses in his hand.

"Phil," my mom said.

I walked around the end of the table and went into my room slamming the door behind me.

School was full of it. All morning I heard people saying Telly's and Mick's names. Several approached me asking if my dad was going to kick Telly out. There had to be a hundred different versions of what had happened floating around. I hadn't even talked to my dad that morning because of last night, but I didn't see how he would do anything since it didn't involve the school.

Standing in the lunch line Larry said, "Everybody says Telly did it. Someone said he was going to have to go to Fairbout." Fairbout was a correction facility up north for juveniles.

"I don't believe any of it," I said, fed up with all that crap.

"I don't know," he said, his eyes wobbling behind his thick glasses. "I think he did it."

"How would you know?"

I turned away in disgust and decided I wasn't going to eat with Larry. I contemplated going down to my dad's room, but as I stood thinking about it, Ryan Olson came up to me.

"Hey, Phil," he said. "Come over and sit with us."

"Us" was my old table with all the old studs. That feeling of wanting to be liked by that crowd came back and won me over. As soon as I got there I knew I'd made a mistake.

"What'd your dad say about Telly?" Ronnie asked when I sat down. "I heard he was going to expel him."

"I don't know," I said sighing and opening my lunch bag. "I guess they have to figure out what happened first."

He snorted. "I think it's pretty fuckin' obvious what happened." He looked around at the other faces gathered there, staring at me.

"My dad," said Ryan, "says he knew something like this would happen."

"They don't even belong around here," Ronnie said. "My dad says they all belong in the city. Let 'em knife each other there."

"Your dad's an idiot," I said. I didn't look up, but I felt the attention shift back to me.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"Look, nobody knows what happened. Anything could have happened."

Ronnie leaned over the table towards me. "What the hell are you talking about? Mick gets stabbed by some nigger and you don't give a shit."

I stared into his face. The sides of his face, where his acne was really bad, were scarlet. His jaw was clenched. Hate bloomed in my chest and made my ears burn.

"Fuck you," I said.

He tried to grab at me knocking over cartons of milk and sending a tray of food onto the floor. I stood up, but lost my balance and fell over backward. I hit my head on the bench behind me. It felt like two giant hands began squeezing my head.

"Get out of here," Ronnie was yelling. "Go cry to your old man. Nobody cares."

I got to my feet, keeping my hand at the back of my throbbing head. I didn't feel any blood, but my skull was pounding. The cafeteria was dead silent. Even the seniors back in their corner, stood up on their benches, trying to get a look. Nobody was moving.

Without bothering to take my lunch bag I lurched out of there and down the hall. I headed towards my dad's room not to tell him what had happened, but thinking maybe he would send me home. But he wasn't in his room. My head hurt and it seemed like a good idea to go behind his desk and sit in the chair with my head back. I couldn't get the picture of Ronnie's face out of my mind. I felt slightly nauseous.

Dad came in, looked at me and said, "What are you doing here? Something wrong?" He came over and looked down into my face. "You don't look so hot."

"I think I need to go home," I said.

"Do you feel sick?" He placed his hand on my forehead. I looked up into his face and saw the worry in his eyes. It was kind of strange seeing the concern there. I don't know why I hadn't expected it. Of course he would be concerned for me. He was my father, after all.

He put his arm around my shoulders as he escorted me out of his room and down the hall. Maybe it was the blow to the head, but I felt like hugging him.

\* \* \*

Telly was going to be out of school for two weeks. Dad said he'd been talking to a counselor or something and they thought things would be cooled down around school by then. I still didn't know everything that had happened

though I refused to believe what all the idiots at school were saying. I figured I could find some way to talk about it with Telly when he got back. When Mick returned he was strangely silent. I don't think anyone had the guts to ask him about it straight out. He missed one football game.

During that time I finished "Death Goes to School." I decided to change the ending from what I'd told Telly. The Cutter wasn't the principal anymore. Nobody finds out who he is. In my new ending, what happens is Bud and The Cutter finally fight, but Bud blows it with the acid. He throws it and misses. The Cutter points the bony finger at him and backs him up against a wall. Then he chops his head off. There isn't anybody left. He's killed them all.

## THE HAT

Mike looked at me out of the corner of his eye. "Do you think I like you?"

I laughed a little at his directness. Someone you don't know asks that, what do you say? "I get along with people pretty good."

He nodded, thinking that over.

"You got a job?" he asked.

I went with the truth, "No."

"You going to school or something?"

"Already been." Though I guessed he hadn't. I wondered if that was a strike against me.

He nodded again, stared at the ground and pulled on the brim of his paint-spattered hat. He wore overalls also covered with paint. Over the pay-phone, he said he'd come get me at the Texaco station. I'd never be able to find the trailer in the dark, he said. He made sure I understood it was four hundred a month.

Now he studied the ground probably trying to figure how reliable I was. Maybe he was thinking he could handle me even if I wasn't. I was clean-cut and twenty-two. He must have been in his mid-thirties. Black curly hair hung down his neck long enough for a pony-tail. Back in Ohio he might have been a hick or metalhead. Here in California he was anybody. He based his decision on who to rent to, he said, on what he got from them; good vibes, bad vibes. He had to like his renters or it was no go.



"I got a brother named Tom," he said scratching his unshaven cheek.

The coincidence appeared to be to my advantage. I didn't say anything.

"Well," he said finally, "why don't you follow me out. See what you think."

\* \* \*

We left town headed towards the foot of the mountains I'd been staring at all afternoon. I'd only been in Oles one day and I'd seen the land was dry and rocky, with ravines, almost riverbeds, cutting through the ground. And yet, the surrounding hills were green and rowed with orange groves. There was money around, that was for sure. Improbable lush vegetation sprouted up on large lots hiding the houses.

This was as good a place as any to stop. I wasn't even sure how long I'd be staying, maybe through the summer. Mike hadn't said anything about a lease. I had just graduated from UCLA in Art and History in December having to go through an extra semester. I'd spent Christmas at home in Ohio where my father wanted me to work at his bank as a teller, at least for a while, he said. Until I figured out what I wanted to do. But that was the problem: I had no idea what I wanted to do. Except that I knew I didn't want to work at the bank. And I didn't want to stay in Ohio. Now, I had everything I owned in my car and I liked that. I could at least travel, move around, and maybe something would happen and I'd find what I wanted to do.

In my headlights I saw dark round shapes, more orange trees I guessed, on either side of us. After a mile we turned off onto a twisty gravel road. He was right about me not being able to find it in the dark.

A long driveway brought us into a clearing surrounded by orange trees in the middle of which sat a strange two-story building lit by outside lights. The trailer was the bottom half of this weird construction. The upper half, supported by heavy beams at each corner, was an upstairs apartment with stairs along the side of the trailer leading up to it.

Once we were both standing before it, he pointed to the loft and said, "I live there. Built it myself a few years back." His voice held a trace of pride so I didn't ask why he just hadn't built a house instead of going to the trouble of putting an upstairs on a trailer.

He showed me the trailer, the entrance a sliding glass door. The walls on the inside were a dark brown fake wood paneling. Small windows near the ceiling ran its length. The bathroom was so small it had no sink and in fact, the shower rained down onto the toilet. The kitchen was also cramped with just three gas burners and a half-size fridge. There were two other rooms; a bedroom and the front room near the doors. A strong antiseptic smell filled those spaces and I thought maybe the paneling was new.

Back outside Mike showed me a picnic table on the other side of the trailer beneath a large tree. "This would be yours, too," he said.

It was fully dark now and the sky was crystal clear. Insects chirped and buzzed. I followed Mike's hand as he pointed to a faint glow on the horizon.

"That's L.A.," he said. "Hour and a half south." From his tone it evidently wasn't far enough away. I could relate. I'd been there four years and still always felt like a tourist. I was sick of all the concrete and traffic.

I looked around the property and from what I could see it was pretty good. This was what I wanted. Get lost for a while. Paint, read, well I wasn't

going to put any pressure on myself. Just live, was good enough. And this place was peaceful, out of the way, and beautiful. I had enough money I didn't have to worry about getting a job for a little while, anyway. And if it sucked, I could just leave.

I told Mike I would take it if he liked me.

"Hey," he said shaking my hand and giving me a grin. "I knew it was you soon as I saw you. I feel things about people."

\* \* \*

I slept there that night and the next day I unpacked and got a better look around. The mountains were close enough to walk to and the variety of plant life on the property amazed me. Giant cacti with limbs resembling big toed feet stood along the edge of the gravel around the trailer. Pink and purple bougainvillea fading now, at the end of their season, covered a wall at the beginning of the driveway. The ground was covered with thick green cover that held buds, sure to blossom in the spring. Not quite ripe oranges hung from the ends of the trees. Oranges that Mike grew and sold though he told me his was just a small operation.

Walking straight out from my door, past a series of orange trees, I came to an incline. At the top I discovered that I was on the bank of a very deep ravine. Large boulders sat in the bed covered with gray moss. The bank on both sides leaned forward having been eaten out from underneath. A metal fence with sharp jutting posts held the earth in place. I followed the little canyon with my eyes up into the mountains. It seemed likely the erosion was due to runoff from the higher planes. With this kind of soil, the water probably just made a mad dash for the ocean twenty miles away.

On my way back to the trailer I stopped when I saw four men sitting around the base of an orange tree. An aluminum ladder leaned up into its branches. The men were eating their lunches out of brown paper bags. They all had dark skin and I thought they might be Mexican. Workers for Mike, I guessed. They regarded me silently as I continued back to the trailer.

\* \* \*

Around five Mike came home driving his truck. Two of his laborers sat in the back. They climbed out as it came to a stop and began unloading ladders and various tools. I sat at the picnic table where Mike saw me and waved.

"Hey neighbor!" He yelled. He seemed to be in a jolly mood, laughing at the novelty of calling me his neighbor. He got out of his truck and came over, a cellular phone in his hand.

"Gettin' settled, Tom?" he asked. "What do you think?"

"I like it," I said.

"Yeah, it's unbelievable here, huh? What are your plans?"

"You mean, for like, work?"

He shrugged and sat across from me at the table. "Whatever."

"I'm not sure. Just enjoying life." I smiled.

"Thataway," he said slapping his hand down on the wooden table.

"That's what you gotta' do. Take it as it comes. Because it keeps comin', believe me, most times when you're not even aware of it. Know what I mean?"

I nodded though he lost me somewhere.

"I took a walk around today," I said. "I was going to ask you about that deep ravine over there."

"In about a month we hit the rainy season. Then we got a river." He nodded letting me know I would appreciate this drastic change in weather.

"How bad does it get?"

"Nothin' to worry about." He laughed. "Few puddles here and there. Though a couple years ago we almost got flooded out. That's why we built that dike."

"I hope I won't be in the middle of a flood."

"Listen, you got nothing to worry about."

"Easy for you to say," I joked, "you're safe up on those stilts."

Mike squinted at me showing no sign he had read what I said jokingly. He leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest. He smiled and shook his head as if to say, "You dumb kid."

"We don't even get the worst of it," he said. "That happens a few miles further down at Green Oak. We rebuild that dike every year. Besides this goddamn trailer is cemented in place. It isn't going anywhere. You taken a good look at this thing?" He gestured towards the trailer. "You think I'd live here if I was worried about a flood?"

Mike's jolly mood seemed to have dissolved.

Behind him one of his workers called his name. Mike ignored him and kept talking.

"I got friends in Green Oak and every year they got major devastation. We don't get nothin' compared to that, believe me."

Again his name was called.

Mike glanced over his shoulder then turned back to me, rolling his eyes. The one who had called Mike's name was walking toward us, but he seemed

somewhat wary. He was tall and lanky, his skin a dark brown. As he got closer I saw he was just a kid, really, the thin wispy beginnings of a mustache above his lips. Chalky dust covered his clothes and the black baseball cap he wore. "Ski America" was stitched in red across its front. His knees poked out of holes in his jeans, and his t-shirt was too small.

"That's Manuel, my chicken fucker," Mike said.

I looked at him not sure if I had heard right.

He turned to face the boy. "Manuel, tell Tomas here about how you like to fuck the chickens."

Mike turned back to me, grinning wildly.

"Ignorant as all hell," he said. "Can't speak a fucking word of English. Ask him about the chickens."

The boy stared at me. I felt at a loss. I didn't know if Mike was serious.

"Go on," he said to me.

"No thanks," I said.

Mike pursed his lips, scratched his cheek and looked down at the table. I understood I had insulted him somehow. Without another word he stood and walked past Manuel towards the truck lightly tapping the phone to his side. Manuel stared at me a moment before turning around. I thought maybe it was a good idea to just avoid Mike after that.

\* \* \*

Since I didn't have a phone I drove into town to a pay-phone to let my family know what was going on. Originally, I told them I was going to drive back out to California and just do a tour of the whole country. I'd said I needed to do some traveling before I was ready to settle down and start working. I'd

said this to my dad when I refused his offer to work at the bank, trying to let him down easy.

They were strangely quiet when I told them I planned to stay in Oles for a while. Maybe they were shocked or just didn't know what to say. I knew they wanted me to live closer to home. I could tell my father was disappointed. He kept asking if I had a job, or if the car was running OK. I gave them my address and said I would write and call when I could. I told them not to worry about me, that I just wanted some time to myself.

I went hiking around the trails that wound through and up the nearby mountains. I liked looking down on Oles from a height, with its rows of orange groves, blocks of tan and white houses, and the roads that spindled off from town in strange tributaries, often swallowed up by hills or trees. The sky was always a perfect blue and a steady breeze blew.

Back at the trailer, when Mike wasn't around, I sat outside at the picnic table and read. I started a few paintings. I took a lot of naps. I listened to music and wrote some letters to friends. At night I watched TV or went into town and rented a video.

I knew sooner or later I was going to have to get a job, but at the time I was really enjoying myself. I didn't see much of Mike, though I occasionally heard him working somewhere on the property. No one ever came out, and on the weekends, Mike got in his truck and disappeared.

\* \* \*

One night, after I'd been there a month, I woke up suddenly. I had fallen asleep in front of the TV in the front room, and in the blue glow from the TV's static I looked at my watch. It was two in the morning. I heard a scuffling

noise outside my doors and became fully awake when I realized it must have been the same thing that woke me. Maybe an animal or something. But when I heard it again I thought it was footsteps.

I got up slowly, trying to stare out at the pitch black beyond my screen door. Normally, I slept with my windows open and the doors unlocked.

"Mike?" I called.

No one answered. Then I heard the sound of someone walking on gravel, going away. I listened until the sound faded completely, and all I heard was a hum within my own ears. Slowly I went to the door and flipped on my outside light. Just beyond the light's circle I thought I saw someone standing there, watching me.

"Mike?" I called again. My voice sounded weak and empty.

The figure faded from view.

I quickly made sure my doors were locked, and pulled the curtains closed. I sat in front of my TV with the sound off, straining to hear if anyone was still outside. It was the first time I had felt unsettled by the idea that I was so alone.

\* \* \*

The next day, waiting for Mike, I watched from behind my screen door as he came back from work. Manuel and another boy rode in the back of the pickup. When it came to a halt they began unloading ladders and large buckets with Mike giving instructions. I was about to slide open my door and ask Mike if he'd been the one prowling around last night when I heard a loud crash. The other boy had dropped a metal toolbox from the bed of the truck onto the ground spilling everything inside. Mike cursed and waved for the boy to get



down off the truck and come to him. The boy looked at Manuel then back at Mike.

"Get over here!" Mike yelled.

Hesitantly, the boy climbed off the truck and approached Mike. Mike knocked the hat off the kid's head. When the boy didn't do anything, Mike pointed to the hat and told him to pick it up. Keeping his eyes on Mike he picked up the hat and put it back on. Mike knocked it off again. This time, when the boy reached for his hat, Mike lifted his foot and kicked him on the hip so that he fell to the ground. The boy made no move to get up.

Watching, I felt my blood start to rise and my heart beat faster. I was afraid Mike was going to kick him again, while he was down, but he didn't. Instead he pointed at the spilled tools and shouted something in Spanish.

Manuel stood off to the side watching. I didn't need an interpreter to know the look he gave Mike was one of pure hate. I stood there wanting to go out and ask Mike what the hell was going on, but afraid of getting him mad. I didn't know if he'd be violent towards me, too. Or maybe he'd just kick me out.

They unloaded everything without another incident and Mike drove them off. When he returned alone, I stepped out to greet him.

"Hey Mike," I said, acting as if this was the first time I'd laid eyes on him all day, "how's it going?"

"Hey," he said, climbing out of the truck. His face looked tired. "Hectic day. Doesn't help when I got morons working for me."

I nodded noncommittally. "Say, were you up walking around late last night? I thought I heard you."

"No," he said, "Why? How late?"

"Around two."

He squinted and looked off over my shoulder as if he was seeing something in the distance. He took a step closer to me. A wave of ripe body odor washed over me.

"Did you see anybody?" he asked.

"No, it was too dark."

He punched a fist into an open palm, turning away. "Damn. I wish you'd seen." He put his hands on his hips and stared at the ground at our feet for a moment. Then, looking at me from the corner of his eye, he said, "Somebody's been fucking with my stuff."

"Last night?"

"No, at least I didn't notice nothin'. But about a month back somebody poured sand into my gas tank. Ended up having to have the damn thing replaced. Cost me a day of work. I also found a dead king snake in the front seat of my truck once, too. That was a couple months ago though."

"Who do you think did it?"

"I've got my suspicions. I got a few people I have problems with. Guys who work for me." He shrugged. "I don't know who it is for sure."

"How many people do you have working for you?"

"Ten or twelve. Hell, I don't know. Sometimes you got whole fuckin' families out here. I pay 'em better than what most people would, considering most of 'em are illegals."

He sighed and walked away from me taking off his hat and massaging his head which I was shocked to see was bald. He had enough hair in back for a

pony-tail, but he was completely bald on top. He turned abruptly, caught my eye, and quickly jammed the hat back on.

He climbed back into his truck and started it up. He stuck his head out the window.

"I'm going to go and talk to some of 'em, see if I can figure out who's messing with my shit. You wanna' come along?"

"No, thanks," I managed to say, feeling sickened at the thought of watching him kick more kids around.

He stared at me for a moment, pursed his lips, and then nodded. He drove off in a cloud of dust.

\* \* \*

I went out walking one Saturday afternoon, drinking a beer, when I met Manuel. I was traveling along the ridge of the deep ravine when I saw him sitting on a large boulder, throwing rocks. He wore the same hat, t-shirt, and jeans he always wore. He smiled as I approached and nodded.

"No espanol," I said.

He shrugged as if that was OK with him.

I sat down on another rock across from him thinking it might be fun to try and talk to him.

"My name is Tom," I said.

He nodded and glanced at the beer in my hand. He was probably sixteen and I thought offering him a drink might loosen him up a little. I held the bottle out to him, he shook his head.

I felt foolish at my attempt at camaraderie and not knowing what to say I said, "Do you like working here?"

He shrugged and threw a rock. I guess he had no reason to think he could talk to me. I could be Mike's friend for all he knew.

"Does your family live around here?"

He frowned and looked at the ground. "Mi familia," he began then stopped. "Mexico," he said.

We were silent. I thought about how he might have got here, what his parents might be doing, why he wasn't in school.

I poured out the rest of my beer and threw the bottle across the ravine into some sand on the opposite slope. I stood and picked up a rock aiming for the bottle, but missing by a mile. Manuel surprised me by standing and throwing a rock at the bottle, too. Silently, we kept at it, taking turns until he finally broke it.

"Nice shot," I told him.

He smiled and adjusted the brim of his "Ski America" hat.

Two days later, like Mike said they would, the rains came. It started during the afternoon in a thundering downpour. I watched from my door as oranges tumbled and rolled down the driveway, collecting in the gullies. The air felt hot and heavy and a fog formed around the base of the trees. The sky was an even sheet of gray.

It was thrilling and frightening at the same time. The rain drummed against the ground, the wind whipping it into the sides of my trailer. On the TV they kept giving flash flood warnings. They said the rains could last for weeks.

Despite all Mike's assurances that I was safe, I worried about watching everything vanish under a tide of mud.

\* \* \*

It was still coming down when I fell asleep in front of the TV. I woke in the night when I thought I heard thunder. But the next noise I heard was a shout. And then it sounded like a car door closing or something banging on the side of a car. Using the TV's static glow, I read my watch. It was three in the morning. I went to my door and looked out.

The rain came down, just as heavy as it had been all day. Through it I saw a light on over at Mike's garage above his truck. He had it parked outside. Suddenly a whiteness separated itself from the body of the truck and I realized I was looking at Mike standing there. I hadn't noticed him because of his white outfit.

I wondered what he was still doing up and in his work clothes. Suddenly I thought it might have something to do with the rain. We were going to be flooded out.

I called to him, but he didn't hear.

Hurriedly, I put on some clothes, grabbed my jacket, and took a deep breath before going out the door.

I hopped and splashed towards the truck. The water was cold, snaking down the collar of my jacket, making me shiver. I didn't look up until I was closer to the light.

I came up on the rear end of the truck and Mike wasn't there. The tailgate was down and the bed held sandbags and it looked like he had a mound of blankets. Mike came around from the front stopping short when he saw me.

"Mike," I said loud so he could hear me over the rain, "what's going on? Are we in danger?"

He looked at me as if he had never seen me before, then slowly looked around him as if noticing the rain for the first time. Water streamed off the brim of his hat.

"We're fine," he said. He came around and wedged himself between me and his open tailgate making me back up. "I was thinking about checking on the level of the water in the ravine." He paused and stood there with his arms crossed, staring at me. His hands and forearms were smeared with mud.

"Mind if I go with you?" I asked. "I'd kind of like to see the damage for myself."

He didn't say anything for what I thought was a long time and I worried that somehow I had pissed him off. He seemed to be staring more through me, then at me.

I almost took back my request, but he said, "Sure," his eyes coming back into focus on my face. He gestured for me to get in the truck.

I went around to the passenger side, leaping over puddles. Mike's door slammed and the engine roared to life. I got in and felt the heater going full blast, the new warmth causing me to shiver even more.

Mike pulled the truck around the trailer, his wipers swinging at maximum speed, and went up a little side road to the top of the dike. We bumped along, the truck's tires bouncing off of rocks and gullies created by the rain's erosion. I couldn't see anything beyond the immediate scope of the headlights. The inside of the truck reverberated with the sound of the rain hitting the roof.

Mike didn't say a word as we drove along. His kept his eyes on the uneven road, his face green from the dashboard lights.

I looked behind us and saw he had forgotten to put up his tailgate. It looked like a few of his sandbags had fallen out and his blankets were in danger of going out, too. But as I was about to mention this to him, we came to a stop.

Without a word he opened his door and stepped out. I did the same and crossed in front of the twin beams of the truck's headlights to stand next to him at the edge of the ravine. I could see nothing within that darkness. Above the truck's engine I heard the roaring of gallons upon gallons of water rushing through.

"I can't see it," I yelled at him.

He nodded his head and pointed to the truck, wanting to go back inside. It was moderately quieter in the cab and he said, "If we follow the dike a little further up, you get a better picture. It's too deep right here."

"How far does the dike go?"

He put the truck in gear and we started off. "Quite a ways. There's a local dump up near the end of it."

"A dump? Doesn't that wash down into the water?"

He shrugged. "Not really. It's a little ways off to the side."

We hit a bump and my head nearly hit the roof.

"You're going to lose your stuff," I said pointing with my thumb to the back.

He looked in his rearview mirror. "That's junk for the dump."

"Oh," I said and looked at the blankets again. They hadn't really moved. I turned around and found Mike staring at me. He licked his lips and turned

back to the muddy trail. I thought maybe all this rain was really bothering him. Or he was just nervous about keeping the truck on the road.

It didn't take us long to get to the beginning of the dike. Mike pointed straight ahead through the windshield.

"The runoff starts to collect down in here and then funnels down into this ravine."

"Where's the dump?" I asked.

He eased the truck over to the right. A sagging metal fence appeared in the headlights a few yards off.

"In there," he said.

We climbed out and I walked with him over to where the ground seemed to fall away into a deep dark hole. I heard the water rushing and falling into the beginning of the large gully. It was a smaller area than I thought it would be.

"Stay here," Mike said. "I'll be right back. I'm gonna' dump my trash in the dump there." He started moving away.

"You need some help?" I asked.

He stopped and looked at me for a moment and then shook his head.

"Just stay here. I'll be right back." He pointed back the way we had come, his hand visibly shaking. "Walk down the dike a ways. You can really see how the water gains power."

He walked off and I took a step in the direction he had motioned me towards, but then I stopped.

I couldn't get over Mike's strange behavior—as if he was sick or something. I thought about earlier, back at the trailer, how he had made me back up when I got too close to the back of the truck.



I was standing still, facing away from Mike, towards the dark carved canyon of flowing water. I don't know what it was, what exactly I thought, but I turned around and ran back towards the truck.

I was just in time to see Mike walking out of the headlights and into the fenced-in dump. He had the blankets slung over his shoulder and he sagged beneath their weight. I looked in the bed of the truck and there, wedged between two sandbags I saw the brim of a hat. Though it was caked with mud I could read the "Ski America."

It was all I could do to keep moving. Once I reached the truck I had to put a hand on the fender to steady myself—my legs felt weak. I looked out to where Mike had gone, out beyond the headlight's range, and I could see nothing. But I knew somewhere out there, he was hiding, maybe burying, Manuel's body. And then I thought maybe he wasn't dead. Maybe Mike didn't kill him and I should rush in there and do something. But that couldn't be true. If he wasn't dead, why would Mike bring him out here?

I kept my eyes on that darkness, expecting and afraid, that at any moment Mike would come lumbering back into the light. I opened the truck's door, slipping in the mud, clawing my way inside. I wanted to move faster than I was going, but I didn't seem able to. Once the door was shut I locked it as well as the passenger's side. The motor was still running.

I put the truck in reverse and backed up, giving myself room to turn around. I could barely see out the windshield with all the rain and my hands shook so badly it took me several tries to get it in gear. And then when I did, I gunned it, spinning out and moving much too quickly back down the dike. I

drove in a panic, my eyes darting continually to the rearview mirror, the engine whining because I needed to shift gears.

When I got to the trailer, I slammed on the brakes. Inside, I could see the blue light of my TV flashing. Then I started out again, somehow making it out to the main road. I don't even remember the decisions I made to get there. Once there I drove more smoothly, heading towards town.

I told myself I was going to get the police. That they would do something and I wouldn't have to worry about Mike. I said that to myself out loud over and over. But it wasn't until I was well past Oles, on some dark road I did not know that I stopped. And then it was only for a second. Long enough to know I was lost and needed to keep going.

### SADIE'S HOUSE

"Honest, Dave, I don't know what's taking her."

"No sweat, Lex. We've got some time."

Lex gestured to a brown couch draped with discarded clothing and said, "Go ahead and sit down. I'll see what's keeping her."

"Fine," Dave said and went to the couch, but did not sit. The place was something of a mess, he thought. Empty pop and beer cans littered every available flat surface. Magazines were strewn on the carpet, an ashtray spilled over with butts and hardened gum. Lex had not offered any explanation or apology for the condition of the apartment. Dave thought of his own house and the mess it was in. Work had been so hectic for him the last week and Mary wasn't much of a housecleaner. He started to look at his watch, but stopped. Best not to know, he thought. He sat somewhat precariously on the very edge of the couch.

He didn't know Lex very well and Yvonne even less. The car ride he'd given him from Chad's was the most time they'd ever spent alone together. Lex was a childhood friend of Chad's--hence the roll of Best Man. Dave was an usher.

He sighed. It'd been a long day. He wished Mary had been around. During all the activities today he felt like something of an outsider--standing on the fringes as groups of his friends joked with each other and each other's

wives. He caught himself leaning back into the couch's dirty clothes and jerked forward all the way up until he was standing again.

Lex came back his tall frame stooped slightly in apology. He was thin and gawky, a shank of blond hair always hanging in his eyes. He smiled sheepishly. "Sorry, Dave. Any minute now."

"No problem."

"She hasn't been feeling too good lately. I think it might be the flu or something."

"Oh, that's too bad. Can she go?"

"Oh yeah, yeah. She'll be fine."

Lex slapped the sides of his thighs like they were drums. He swung his head to the right then left, his neck audibly popping with each turn.

"How about that rehearsal, huh?" he said. "It's going to be some wedding."

"Yes, it sure looks like it."

"Chad and Lisa," Lex said in wonderment scratching the back of his head. "The old marriage pit."

He glanced at Dave. "Sorry, I didn't mean..."

Dave forced a smile. "It's okay. It's not for everyone." He knew Yvonne and Lex had been living together for a while. He once heard Yvonne say she wasn't against the "concept" of marriage, it just wasn't practical.

"How is Mary?" Lex asked.

"She's fine," he smiled and again it was just the corners of his mouth stretching.

Yvonne came out tugging at the sleeves of a black corduroy jacket Dave guessed was from 1970. She wore a black mini-skirt with black tights and oversized black shoes. There wasn't a hint of makeup on her pale face. A "granola" Mary called her. If this was her sick look, it wasn't much different from her norm.

"All set," she said sounding resigned.

"You look great," Lex said.

"Then give me a kiss."

Embarrassed for them, Dave looked down and studied his watch. They should have been there five minutes ago.

In the car, they sat in back while Dave drove.

"You know where this place is we're supposed to eat?" Lex asked.

"Mary and I ate there once," Dave said, looking at them through the rearview mirror. "The Green House. Not a great name, but the food's good."

"Ugh," said Yvonne turning her face to the window. "The thought of food. Where is Mary again?"

"Sadie's. We're picking her up on the way."

"Groovy," she said without any enthusiasm.

Dave glanced at her through the mirror. Mary and Yvonne had met maybe twice, he thought. Mary had not liked her and he guessed the sentiments were returned.

"Hey," said Lex, "how's the bishop? He looked in top form today."

"He's fine. Same as always." The "bishop" was Dave's father who was not a bishop but a pastor. Dave had made the distinction clear, but Lex appeared stuck on the title.

"He's practically married our entire generation. First you and Mary, Dale and Donna, Rachel and Isaac, now Chad and Lisa. Who knows?" Dave saw Lex inch closer to Yvonne. "Maybe we're next on the list."

She slapped his leg and said, "Dream on."

At a stop light Dave drummed his hands on the steering wheel. He wondered if Mary was going to be upset if they were late. And then he wondered if he wanted her to be upset.

After the rehearsal there'd been a little get together at Chad's. He called her from there and said they would pick her up at 5:30. The dinner started at 6:00. As usual whenever he called her at Sadie's, he felt like he was pestering her, interrupting something. He was curt, and abrupt, hoping she'd get the message that he was annoyed with her. There was no indication that she had.

They'd been getting into fights over absolutely everything lately. Even this morning had started off badly. His cheeks reddened at the memory of his playful attempt to join her in the shower. She had held the shower door shut, saying she wasn't in the mood. He tried not to let it bother him, but he couldn't help feeling rejected. They hadn't had sex in over a month. And then she called Sadie, wanting to go there for lunch while he was at the rehearsal. She wanted to be there by noon and though it was an hour before the rehearsal, he dropped her off and left. No invitation was given to come in and join them until he had to leave for the rehearsal. He doubted if they even said goodbye to each other.

At the time, he felt too hurt and stubborn to say anything at all. He drove around killing time, eventually eating at McDonald's.

Even though he entertained the idea, talking to his father would be too embarrassing. They'd been married a year and a half. They should still be in nuptial bliss. He didn't even know what he would say. It was hard for him to pinpoint what the problem was. He assumed they were the spats or problems every newlywed went through.

"Where'd you and Mary go for your honeymoon?" Lex asked from the back. Dave had been driving in complete silence, ignoring the presence of his backseat passengers.

"Mexico," he said feeling the regret he always felt when he thought of Mexico.

"That must have been fun."

"Yeah," Dave said hoping Lex wouldn't persist for details.

When he thought of the trip to Mexico what he pictured was the whiteness of their room. The white walls, the white bed and carpet, the whiteness of the curtain on the window. He had forgotten to pack something, he remembered. That had started the bickering. What was it then? He couldn't recall. But there had been a shouting match. Mary refusing to get out of bed at one point. Half their week was spent that way. Had there been any fun at all. He knew there had. The beach and the water. Mary trying to help him with his spanish. Even late night games of gin in the hotel room.

Dave honked the horn as they pulled into Sadie's driveway. He looked at his watch. They were half an hour late. He honked the horn a second time and waited.

After a suitable amount of time when he thought she should have come out he said, "I'll go get her."

Going up the walk felt like trespassing. Here was Mary's sacred ground: Sadie's house. They spent a lot of time together. Time Dave was not allowed a part of. He'd been glad at first. The move to Minneapolis had been for his job. It was just coincidence so many of their college friends ended up there too. Including Sadie.

Sadie answered the door with a smile Dave thought was a little mocking.

"Oh, hi Dave," she said as if his appearance was an inevitable let-down.

She led him into the house and once they were in turned to him, that smile firmly in place. She'd had a severe haircut, he noticed; her straight red hair cut short against her scalp. She was already so small, so petite, now with that hair she looked like a little boy.

He gazed around the room, but Mary wasn't there.

"She's in the bathroom," Sadie said then laughed, covering her mouth.

Dave smiled in spite of himself.

"What? What's going on?" He wondered briefly if a joke was being played on him.

She breathed deeply, waved her hand in the air, and said, "Nothing."

Suddenly Dave realized she was drunk. He was only mildly surprised. Dave always thought Sadie was wild. There was something about her. An aggressiveness, he thought.

In college, Mary and Sadie spent a semester in Spain. It was the semester just before Dave and Mary got together. Sometimes, Mary and Sadie



spoke spanish to each other in front of him. It made him uncomfortable, but he didn't say anything, willing to play the "gringo."

He'd seen pictures of the trip. Mary and Sadie lounging together on the beach. Mary and Sadie in front of some landmark. Mary and Sadie sitting behind a table, their arms around each other. But the trip had ended badly, he guessed. A fight or something. During the period of time the friendship was on the rocks, Dave came into the picture. Mary didn't talk about that time much. In any case when Dave and Mary moved to Minneapolis two years later, Mary learned Sadie was there and called her and they evidently made up.

"Sit down, relax or something," Sadie said.

Dave nodded and paced around her living room. It was strange how much time his wife spent here, but it was all relatively unfamiliar to him. He stopped before a black and white picture mounted on the wall. It was of Sadie and in it she had her back to the camera, looking over her shoulder, gazing into the lens. It was an odd picture, Dave thought. She was evidently nude, but there was so much darkness, you could only see the upper part of her back and shoulders and face. She was different in the picture, different than he'd ever seen her. She looked vulnerable.

He felt her watching him.

"Nice picture," he said for lack of anything else to say.

"Thanks," she said smiling, her eyes almost some kind of challenge.

"Where'd you have it done?"

"I can't remember," she said. "Downtown somewhere. Some gallery."

He nodded. "Think she's ready?"

"Mary?" She pursed her lips as if thinking it over. "Probably."

They stared at each other for a moment.

"I suppose you want me to go get her," she said. Before Dave could say anything, Sadie held up a finger, "Just a minute." She went down the hallway to the bathroom.

Dave picked up a framed picture that sat on an endtable. It was a picture of Mary and Sadie. One of the Spain pictures, he guessed. They were sitting side by side on a picnic table. Mary's hair was long then, not short like it was now. He often wished she'd kept it long. She had beautiful black hair.

Sadie returned pulling Mary by the wrist. Mary was using a damp washcloth to dab at a pink stain spotting the breast of her dress.

She looked at Dave and frowned, "Dave, I ruined my dress."

He walked over to her and looked at the stain.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Wine."

He glanced at her face wondering if perhaps she was drunk too.

"Lex and Yvonne are waiting out in the car," he said.

Mary and Sadie looked at each other. "Yvonne," Mary said and made a face.

Sadie chuckled. "Tell her you just got done eating some red meat."

They laughed.

"Are you ready?" Dave asked.

"As I'll ever be," she said.

She turned to Sadie and said, "Hugs." They hugged each other and then quickly kissed on the lips. It was something they did routinely and every time Dave winced. He tried not to, but he couldn't help it. There was something

about it that just bothered him. He supposed it was an affectation they picked up in Spain. European girls were very affectionate with their girlfriends.

"Have fun at the party," Sadie said and waved to him.

He put a hand on Mary's back as she stepped out the door.

"Are you drunk?" he asked quietly as they neared the car.

She stopped and cocked her head giving him a measured look of disappointment. "No, I am not drunk."

"Ok, ok," he said. "Sorry. It looked like Sadie was well off."

Mary's complexion changed and she laughed. "Sadie's so much fun."

"Hello, hello," Mary said to Lex and Yvonne, seat-buckling herself in.

"Hi," they said at the same time.

"How's Sadie?" Yvonne asked Mary as they backed out of the drive.

"G-r-r-reat," she said like Tony the Tiger. She leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

"You ok?" Dave asked.

She didn't open her eyes, "Sure."

"Feeling sick?" Yvonne asked from the back seat. "I don't feel so good either. I think I ate some bad tofu."

Mary smiled to herself.

Once on the freeway Dave became conscious of how quiet it was in the car.

"What did you guys do today?" he asked Mary.

She leaned her head forward and pulled at her dress to get a good look at the stain. "We talked." She rolled her window down a little. "It's hot in here."

"Would you mind rolling the window back up?" Yvonne asked. "All the fumes from the freeway are making me queasy."

Mary rolled the window back up.

"You a sports fan?" Lex asked Dave, hunching forward to talk over the seats.

"No, not really."

"Huh," he said and sat there for a moment before sliding back.

It grew quiet again. Dave found himself thinking about Sadie. He supposed he found her attractive. There was a certain edge about her. She was very sexual, he thought and the more he thought about it, he realized it was true. All her gestures, the way she talked, all that stuff with kissing Mary goodbye on the lips. He wondered if Mary noticed. Sadie must have always been like that. Who else would put a nude picture of themselves in their living room?

From the backseat he heard Yvonne say quietly, "I don't know if I'm going to make it."

Dave heard Lex begin to say something, but it was covered up by Mary reaching over and placing a hand on his thigh.

"How did the rehearsal go?" she asked.

"Fine," he said. Then looking at her a little reproachfully, "I wish you'd been there."

She smiled and gave his leg a reassuring squeeze. "I'm sorry hon'. I just didn't feel up to it."

He took his right hand off the steering wheel and placed it on hers. It was the first real moment of warmth they'd shared in days, he thought. The

realization spread a glow of warmth through his body that almost brought tears to his eyes. Maybe it was the affectionate gesture itself. Mary's open affection, her warmth, was what originally made Dave fall in love with her. Where had that gone? he suddenly wondered.

"You got a cup or something in here?" Lex asked leaning forward again.

"Lex," Yvonne called in an anguished whisper.

"A cup?" Dave asked. Mary took her hand away and leaned into her corner.

"Yeah, I think Yvonne's going to be sick."

Dave and Mary exchanged startled glances.

"I mean," said Lex, "there's a pop-can back here, but puking into a pop-can can be a messy business. Trust me. I know."

"Let me pull over," Dave said.

"Yeah, take an exit or something." Lex sat back, murmuring to Yvonne.

Dave saw a sign for an exit and began signalling.

He held his hand out to Mary who had a hand over her eyes as if shielding them from a bright light. "Check the glove compartment," he said.

"For what?"

"I don't know. A sack or something."

"Good God," she said popping it open and digging around inside. "There's nothing in here. You'll have to pull over to the side of the road."

Dave took the exit and at the top of the ramp saw a gas station off to the right.

"Is she ok?" he asked. "There's a gas station."

"Do it," Lex said.

He turned, drove down to the entrance and pulled in, parking along the side of the station. As soon as the car stopped, Lex helped Yvonne out and led her to a door displaying the insignia for a woman's bathroom. They looked clownish, Dave thought; Lex's tall body stooped over, an arm placed loosely around Yvonne's frail shoulders while she held a hand to her throat. Yet, there was something oddly touching about it.

Mary must have thought so, too, because she said, "I hope they make it." She watched them hustle inside the bathroom. "Hah," she said, "he's going in too. What a trooper."

"Can you imagine what tofu tastes like coming up?"

Mary looked at Dave and they both laughed.

"They're such a wierd couple," Mary said. "It makes you wonder how some people ever get together. At least they're not married."

"What do you mean?" Dave felt all his good humor fade away.

She shrugged. "They can always break up."

"So could we," he said. He didn't know why he said it. On reflection he knew it wasn't likely she would give a response he wanted to hear.

She didn't say anything and turned to look out her window.

It was getting dark out. The dashboard clock read seven o'clock. The dinner had started an hour ago.

"I can't go to your grandmother's on Friday," Mary said suddenly.

"What?" He had to adjust momentarily to what she was talking about.

"It's her birthday," he complained.

"I've got too much stuff to do."

"What stuff? My whole family is going to be there. She's ninety years old. We have to go. I already told my parents we'd drive down with them."

"Well, I can't. Sadie's set up a job interview for me. I've got to get ready."

Dave stared at the side of her face.

"What interview?"

When she didn't respond he repeated the question.

She looked at him her eyebrows raised in what he recognized as a defensive posture.

"There's an opening for a full time photographer at the Weekly. Sadie put a good word in for me with her editor."

"The Weekly? Would you want to do that?"

Mary shrugged, "Sure."

"When did you set up the interview?"

"About a week ago."

"A week ago?" He was going to say more, but he suddenly stopped. He tried to remember if she'd said anything to him about it and was sure she hadn't. How could she have forgotten to mention it? She didn't tell him on purpose, he realized with a shock. Was she going to surprise him? he wondered. Or didn't she want him to know? He felt completely disoriented.

She turned away from him and they both watched as Lex appeared, leading Yvonne out the bathroom door. They shuffled slowly towards the car. It was apparent Yvonne had been sick. She held a tissue to her lips, and kept her eyes on the ground. Lex walked behind her holding a hand out as if she were on ice and might slip at any moment.

"How is she going to be able to go to the dinner?" Mary asked.

Yvonne got in the car first, immediately leaning her head back into the corner and delicately closing her eyes. Lex came in, noisily expelling air through his nose.

He smiled weakly and said, "Sorry."

"Is she ok?" Dave asked. "You want me to take you guys home?"

"No, she's fine, fine," said Lex.

"You're still going to the dinner?"

"Yeah, we'll make it."

Dave glanced over his shoulder at Yvonne. She was sitting absolutely still. He shrugged and said, "Ok," and drove out towards the freeway ramp.

He looked over at Mary, but she seemed to be resting, too. Her head was against the window, her eyes closed.

He considered saying something encouraging about the job interview. That job would be perfect for her, he knew. Photography was what Mary had gone to school for. He hadn't considered she might work for a newspaper. He always thought of her work as being kind of artsy. Their walls were covered with her framed pictures. Splayed light coming through mist enshrouded trees, leaf covered benches, portraits of models from college studio sessions. He suddenly had a thought.

"Hey?" he said.

Mary opened her eyes and slowly turned her head.

"Did you take that picture of Sadie in her living room?"

She stared at him for what he thought was too long.

"Why?"



"I was just wondering." He swallowed feeling strangely nervous.

She nodded her head.

"She said she got it taken downtown." He watched her face closely not sure what he was looking for.

She narrowed her eyes. "Why'd you ask me then?"

Why had he asked? he wondered. "Because," he said, "I was just thinking." What was important about the fact that he had established Sadie was lying? Or maybe she really couldn't remember. He was starting to feel slightly light-headed.

"Thinking what?"

"I don't know." He said it louder than he meant to. He checked the rear view mirror and saw both Lex and Yvonne, watching them. He wished there was some way he could get them out of the car.

He glanced over at Mary, but she was looking straight ahead. He turned on the radio so Yvonne and Lex wouldn't hear them if they talked.

"Why do you spend so much time over there?" he asked, keeping his voice low.

"Over where?"

"At Sadie's. You're always going over there. You spend more time there than you do at the house. Which is why it's such a mess."

Mary sat up and glanced over her shoulder at the backseat. And then in an equally quiet voice said, "I can't believe you."

"What?"

"Why are you so pissed off all of a sudden?"

"Why didn't you tell me about this photography job?"

"What's the big deal?"

"It's a big deal."

Their voices were starting to get louder.

Lex was suddenly leaning over the seat. "Do you mind turning the radio off? Yvonne's got a headache."

Dave turned off the radio. "Sorry," he said guiltily.

"Hey Mary," Lex said, "are you into photography? My little sister just got her first camera last Christmas. She's pretty good too."

Dave took a deep calming breath and watched the signs on the freeway. The exit for the restaurant was only a couple of miles away.

"She's been taking pictures of our dog a lot," Lex continued. "You ever thought of doing that?"

Mary shook her head without looking at him.

"There could be a lot of money in that," he said. "You see all kinds of posters and shit with cute little puppies or kittens. People eat that stuff up. Put a good looking dog in a room with, like, a ball or something and just let him play. You're bound to get some good pictures out of that."

Mary leaned forward and laughed into her hand.

Lex tapped Dave on the shoulder asking, "What's with her?"

Dave looked over at Mary, still laughing.

"She only takes pictures of nude people, Lex," he said.

Mary stopped laughing and gave Dave a look of amazement. Dave felt a momentary surge of pride that he'd surprised her.

"Cool," Lex said. "That stuff sells just as good as the cute animals." He gave a little laugh. "Better, probably."

Dave decided he would just drop Lex and Yvonne off and go home. He was in no mood to have to fake like he and Mary were having a good time in front of all his friends.

"We're pretty late," he said to Lex.

"That's all right. Nobody'll care. I'm sure most of them are wasted by now anyway."

"Great," Mary said.

"Oh well," Lex said and sunk back into his seat.

"Do we really have to go to this?" Mary asked angrily, putting her head back against the headrest. "I just know I'm going to be pushed over the edge."

Dave exhaled tiredly. "Why are you saying this now?"

"I just had a sudden vision of all your friends falling down drunk. What a good time that will be."

"What do you mean *my* friends?" Dave asked.

"It's *your* friends we're going to see."

"They're your friends too."

She shook her head.

"Yes, they are."

She turned and looked him. "Don't tell me who my friends are."

Almost too late, Dave saw the exit he wanted and took it.

"This isn't the right exit," Mary said.

"Yes, it is."

"No it isn't. You want Central. This is Docker."

"It's on Docker."

"No, it's on Central."

"Oh great," Lex said from the back, "you're going to get us lost, Dave."  
Dave knew it was meant as a joke, but he almost turned in his seat and yelled at Lex to shut up.

Dave came to a stop sign and took a right. The area looked familiar.

"This is the way to Pancho's," Mary said.

"This is the right way," Dave said.

Mary sighed and out of the corner of his eye he saw her shake her head.

"Knock it off!" he yelled at her before he knew what he was doing. "Just shut up for a minute."

"I didn't say anything."

"Hey, hey," Lex called, "peace up there."

Dave grit his teeth.

He continued down the street stopping at another stoplight. Mary leaned forward and pointed down the block. A flat square building off to the left held a large glowing red sign saying, "Pancho's". It was the wrong restaurant.

"Shit," Dave said as they drove past.

"We could go in there," Lex said. "I don't care where we go anymore. I'm hungry. Are you hungry?" he was evidently asking Yvonne.

"No," Dave said solemnly. "We're going to the Green House. We're going to eat *there*." He said it more for Mary than anyone else. She was going to go even if she didn't want to. Even if he didn't want to.

He circled the block and started driving back towards the freeway.

"Why wouldn't you listen to me?" Mary asked.

"Mary," he said. He knew if they started arguing again, that he could start yelling at her. *He* was the one being pushed over the edge. The last thing he really wanted to do was give Yvonne and Lex a show.

"You wouldn't listen to me if your life depended on it," she said.

"Mary," he said again, a little louder.

"What?"

"Hey, come on," Lex said putting his head over the seat. "I thought you guys were the perfect couple."

Mary snorted derisively.

Dave got back on the freeway and for a while it remained absolutely quiet in the car. His palms on the wheel felt sweaty. He was aware that Lex and Yvonne were sitting there taking this all in. He looked over at Mary and swallowed the feeling of despair he was beginning to feel.

"Why are you driving so slow?" Mary asked.

"I'm going the speed limit."

"You always go the speed limit. That is the perfect statement for you. You're so goddam safe."

"Would you rather die in a car wreck?" he asked.

"Not me," Lex called from the backseat.

She shook her head. "That's not what I mean. I'm talking about everything. First job offer that comes along, what do you do? You take it so you can be back here around all your friends."

"*My* friends? You're the one always with Sadie."

"Leave Sadie out of this. If I had to be around you all the time I'd go crazy."

"There's the Central exit," Lex offered in a somewhat timid voice. "It's still early. I bet everybody's still there."

"Oh goody," Mary said.

"You don't have to go," Dave said. "Call a cab."

"You call a cab. I'll take the car."

"Fine."

He took the exit and once on Central he knew where he was going. They drove to the restaurant in absolute silence. Dave's jaw ached from having his teeth clenched. He relaxed and as he did so he had a sudden vision, as if he had been watching from outside, of what this ride had been like. There was no way they could fix the way Yvonne and Lex saw them. Inwardly he cringed at the image of Lex relaying all the fighting to his friends.

He stopped the car directly across from the Green House and turned in his seat to look at Yvonne and Lex. "Go ahead," he said. "I think we're just going to drive on home."

Yvonne opened her door and got out without saying goodbye.

"Come on guys," Lex said. "You'll have fun inside."

When neither Dave or Mary responded Lex opened his door and said, "Drive careful." And shut the door behind him.

Dave turned back around in his seat and sighed heavily.

"Well," he said, "I'm sure everyone will find that interesting."

Mary sat with her arms crossed upon her chest.

He looked down at his hand in his lap, at the wedding band on his finger. He tried to imagine his life without Mary and he couldn't do it. The very idea

seemed preposterous to him. They'd laid future plans, after all. They had a house together. They would work this out.

"You want to go someplace else?" he asked quietly. "Talk or something?"

Mary gave no sign she had heard him.

"I think this photography job is really going to pull through for you."

Without looking at him she said, "Drop me off at Sadie's."

Dave let his head fall back against the seat and squeezed his eyes shut.

"Come on, Mary." He didn't like, but couldn't seem to help, the pleading sound his voice had.

Mary shook her head and he saw she was crying.

"Take me to Sadie's."

"No," he said. She looked at him. He felt like a pouting child. He grabbed the steering wheel with both hands as if to wrench it loose.

"Leave Sadie out of this," he said.

"I can't." She turned her face to the window.

"Why not? What is it with you and Sadie?" he asked his voice becoming very loud. "It's always Sadie this, Sadie that. Like she's the goddamn gospel or something."

She held a hand up covering her eyes and the pose aggravated him. Was she even listening to him? He gave a loud sigh of exasperation. Fine, if she wanted to go to Sadie's that's where he would take her.

"I swear to God," he said, "you love her more than me."

His words filled up the sudden silence. And even after a little while it still felt to him as if he'd just said them. All the way to Sadie's house they reverberated off the insides of the car.

## PEANUTS

One September morning I arrived at my parent's house expecting to find my older brother, Roger, who I had not seen for some time. He had recently returned from spending his summer months working various basketball camps. He was getting married in October and though he had never asked me himself, it was common knowledge I was to be his Best Man. My mother had called asking me to come home this weekend since Roger was going to be around. Somewhat ominously she had added that we needed to talk.

It was seven-thirty in the morning when I entered the house. I'd been keeping strange hours and been on the road since four a.m. My father sat at the kitchen table still in his pajamas reading the paper and drinking coffee.

"William," he said in surprise setting his mug down. He rose from his chair, but remained standing where he was. "You're early."

"Well," I said, "I couldn't sleep last night."

"Me either," he said and added by way of explanation, "my sciatic nerve." His hands hung uncertainly at his side and I wondered if he was debating hugging me.

"Your mother's still in bed. Want some coffee?"

"No, thanks." I took the seat across from him and he sat back down. Mom and dad slept in separate rooms, had been doing so for the last fifteen years.

"How was the trip up?" he asked. "How's Madison?"



"Fine. Nothing new."

He nodded. "Roger was here last night, but he ended up going home. He and Michelle should be here around noon."

"Great. How's mom?"

My dad's face softened into bland detachment. "She's fine," he said and drank from his coffee. "Aren't you hungry? I was going to run down to Thelma's and get some cinnamon rolls."

I glanced at his pajamas. "Why don't I go get them, dad? My car's blocking the way anyway."

"OK," he said. "Let me get you some cash." He started to get up.

"That's alright. I got it."

He stood and looked around him. "Where the hell's my wallet? I know. I'll pay you when you get back."

"Fine, dad."

\* \* \*

It had been a long time since I'd been home though mom and dad occasionally visited me in Madison. There wasn't much reason to come here. I worked in Madison and took a few graduate classes at the University there. Spruce was a town of a thousand people two hours south of Minneapolis where my older sister lived. Roger lived the closest, in LaCrosse, only a half hour away.

Driving by the Presbyterian church on my way to the small downtown, I saw a familiar brown Mazda parked on the street, its front wheel up on the curb. I stopped and backed up, parking in front of it. I left the engine running and tried to look into what I thought was Roger's car, but the windows were

fogged up. Down along the corner of the driver's window there was a clear triangle where I could see inside. Roger had the seat tilted back and slept facing the roof, his mouth wide open, his hands limp in his lap.

I grasped the cold car handle and opened the door. It gave a groan and a silver Coors beer can clanged onto the pavement.

Roger bolted up, squinting at me. When he recognized me he relaxed back into his seat.

"What the hell, man," he said. "You scared the shit out of me."

The car was a mess, full of empty beer cans, dirty tissues, candy wrappers, and stacks of papers piled askew on his backseat. An unopened Coors was wedged between the windshield and dash. The air smelled stale and hot. Roger rubbed his hands over his face dislodging his baseball cap and stretched. He wore hightop basketball shoes without socks, grungey blue sweat pants and an equally grungey blue sweatshirt.

"What is going on?" I asked not hardly able to believe what I was seeing.

"Christ," he sighed heavily, "I don't know. It was too foggy out last night. Here, look out."

I backed out of the car as he hunched forward and straightened the seat. Too foggy out? What was he talking about?

"You just pull in?" he asked.

"I've already been up at the house. Dad thinks you went home last night. What happened?"

He shrugged and stared at me. "What time is it?" he finally asked.

"About eight."

"How'd you get here so early?"

It was my turn to shrug and I watched as he reached over and popped open the Coors. He took a drink and then ran his hand over the windshield wiping away condensation.

"I bet that tastes good," I said.

A car drove slowly by, the older couple inside giving us a good look.

"I'm surprised you didn't get arrested," I said.

"I hope Michelle didn't call mom and dad or vice versa," he said.

"Did she think you were coming home?"

"I don't know." He rubbed his eyes.

"Why'd you drink so much?"

"It's mom and dad. They drive you to it." He looked at me and smiled.

"How long you home for?"

"Til tomorrow night."

He nodded. "Me and Michelle will probably stop by later. I better get home so I can shower. She'll be glad to see you."

"It's been a while."

"Why don't we just meet up with you around one or so?"

"Fine."

He shut the door, started the car and rolled down his window.

"Don't tell mom and dad you saw me," he said. "OK?"

I nodded and waved him away.

He backed up and drove off, his muffler making a lot of noise and a thin blue cloud following behind him.

I bent down and picked up the beer can that had fallen out of the car. Why had I agreed to not tell mom and dad? I suppose it was some fraternal

sentiment. He and I against mom and dad—though that didn't really ring true. I was just here for the weekend, but already I felt ready to leave.

\* \* \*

Mom was up by the time I got back.

"Will," she said as I set the rolls on the dining room table, "you didn't have to go and get those. George could have done it."

"It's OK, mom." I wonder what would have happened if dad had found Roger camped out in the car. Then I realized he would have done the same thing I'm doing—essentially covering up for him.

My mom was not much over five feet tall. She stood in the kitchen pouring out glasses of orange juice for us. Her hair was mussed from sleep and she wore a long shapeless pink bathrobe. We sat across from each other at the dining room table just as dad and I had done earlier. He sat in the other room, already enraptured by the TV.

"I don't know how you can stand to drive so early," she said.

"I'm used to being up from work."

She nodded chewing on a roll.

"So," I said, "Roger and Michelle getting excited about the wedding?"

She raised her eyebrows tiredly, "I suppose," she said.

"You know he still hasn't asked me to be his Best Man. I mean, I could just show up at the wedding sitting with you guys."

Mom shook her head and shrugged. "I don't know what it is with him—why he can't just ask you. But I know for a fact, because Michelle has said so that you're it." She polished off her roll.

"Well, whatever." I waited thinking maybe now was when she would bring up whatever it was she had meant when over the phone she had said "We need to talk." But evidently now was not the time.

When she didn't say anything I said, "Dad says his sciatic nerve has been bothering him."

Mom rolled her eyes. "Have you heard the latest?"

"What."

"About a week ago he wakes up in the middle of the night—a terrible pain in his chest. He comes into my room, wakes me up, makes me call an ambulance." She shook her head and took a sip of juice.

"Jesus, mom," I said, mystified at her glibness and shocked I hadn't heard about this.

"He gets to the hospital. The doctors put him on the treadmill, wires running from his chest, they're checking his heart, the whole bit. And what do you know? He's doing outstanding on all the tests. They've never seen somebody his age doing so well. Practically runs that treadmill into the ground." She stopped, reached for another roll.

"So what was it?"

"Peanuts."

"Peanuts?"

"He ate some peanuts before he went to bed and they gave him heartburn." She bit into the roll, her eyes asking me if I could believe it. "An ambulance, tests, the whole deal, because of some peanut."

We both turned and looked at dad who was blithely watching the TV.

"He's something else," she said. She stood up, went to the sink, and washed out her dishes.

\* \* \*

Roger and Michelle showed up for a late lunch. He was shaved and wearing another sweat pants/sweatshirt combination. Michelle surprised me by giving me a hug. Roger bypassed us going into the TV room and joining dad on the couch.

"I guess he doesn't give hugs," I said to her.

"He doesn't even hug me." That was not difficult to believe.

"The wedding's almost here."

She rolled her eyes and smirked, "Don't remind me. Guess who's been doing all the work for it?"

I smiled in commiseration.

"Roger doesn't make a decision unless it's about what basketball game to watch. And then he usually flicks back and forth between all of them."

"Who's going to be your Maid of Honor?"

"Nancy."

I nodded. Nancy was Michelle's younger sister, actually my age. Nancy was a busybody, always on the go, into sports. Michelle had been a bookworm in college. She got good grades, graduated with honors, never having dated anyone else seriously, besides my brother. People in my family often joked that Roger should marry Nancy and I should marry Michelle.

I sensed a forced cheerfulness coming from Michelle. I attributed it to the fact Roger had not come home last night. I doubt he told her about his camping trip in the car.

Michelle was three years older than me and a year younger than my brother. She was an attractive woman, with long very straight and thin blond hair, blue eyes, typical Norwegian stock as my father would say. She dressed conservatively, wearing things that tended to cloak her figure. Although she was pretty enough, I was not really attracted to Michelle. Maybe it was that conservatism—she always seemed so guarded.

During lunch, after mom forced dad to shut off the TV "for at least a half hour," Roger casually looked up from his plate and said, "So, you're going to be Best Man, right?"

I laughed and said, "Is that what you want?"

He shrugged and said, "You know me better than anyone."

Jesus, I thought, feeling my throat tighten. I wasn't particularly moved by his asking me, but his saying that I knew him affected me. I didn't see how he could say that since we rarely ever talked. And it made me think that maybe we had been close once, a long time ago, but weren't any longer.

"You're going to do it, aren't you?" my mom asked obviously baffled at my hesitation.

"Of course," I said hurriedly. "Of course. That'd be great."

"You're going to have to come up with a toast for the reception," my dad said. "But I could help you out."

Mom snorted.

Afterward, while plates were being cleared off the table, I stood in the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror. I imagined this was any room, any house, in all the world. The sounds around me, the clinking silverware and dishes, the faucet in the kitchen, the TV, were all part of some foreign

community. I could walk out and they might speak German. This didn't have to be my family. It could be anyone.

\* \* \*

Later in the afternoon, in between sports broadcasts, Roger challenged me to a game of ping pong. The table was in the basement where signs of our past competitiveness marked the ceiling in chipped rafters and the table itself where we would slam our paddles down in frustration. We weren't playing heatedly that day. We just volleyed the ball back and forth.

"Michelle's been throwing away my Playboys," he said at one point.

"You subscribe to Playboy?"

He shrugged, keeping his eye on the ball.

"Why's she doing that?" I asked.

"Jealousy. She gets jealous of anybody. I can't even watch a movie with Jamie Lee Curtis in it."

"Maybe you should just toss them yourself."

The ball went back and forth, back and forth.

"Sometimes I think I never should have dumped Susan. The sex was incredible. Sometimes Michelle has zits on her back."

I grabbed the ball out of the air. "Come on, Roger," I said. "You're getting married in a month, for Christ's sake."

I served the ball and we continued to play.

"That reminds me," he said. "Michelle was thinking you might want to stop in LaCrosse for dinner on your way back to Madison. I have to go over to Onalaska later on, but she'd enjoy the company."



It was impossible for him to suggest that he would want me to stop, too. I made it easy for him and just said I would.

Dad came downstairs and watched us for a while and eventually took Roger's place who went upstairs to check ESPN's Sportscenter.

"You're still pretty good at this," dad said as we volleyed.

"Just like riding a bike," I said. I was alternating corners with the ball, trying to get him running.

"Where are they having the reception?" I asked

"A ballroom in LaCrosse, I gather. Michelle's got it all mapped out."

"What do you think about it?"

He glanced up from the bouncing ball. "About what?"

"About them getting married?"

"What about it?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. They don't especially seem like they're in love."

He gave a prolonged, "Aaah," as if I should know better and said, "They've been together five years now. They're out of that puppy love stage. Marriage isn't just about love, you know."

I wondered if he realized just how much he was speaking from experience.

"Why'd you marry mom?" I asked holding the ball, waiting for him to answer before I served.

He laughed a little and held his hands out in supplication. "Are we playing ping pong here or what?"

"I just mean, why her and not somebody else?"

"She was fun. She liked to do things. She was funny. I was attracted to her."

"But not anymore?"

He looked at me in silence. We could hear the murmur of the TV upstairs.

Finally, I just served.

"If you need it," he said, "I've got a book that gives some good examples of wedding toasts."

When dad moved out of their shared bedroom all those years ago, he said it was because of his allergies reacting to mom's perfumes, all the dust from her clothing. It occurred to me my family never really said the truth. Or, if not the truth, they didn't say what would lead to the truth. I don't know why, but for some reason, I didn't think I was like that. I wanted the truth.

\* \* \*

Roger and Michelle left shortly after supper and the rest of the evening was spent washing dishes and sitting in front of the TV. My dad went to bed around 9:30.

I sat down at the dining room table with a bowl of ice-cream. Mom got up from the sofa where she had been watching the news and turned off the set. She turned off all the lights in the house and then sat across from me in the dark. Light streaked in from the street lamp outside and we heard faint music from my dad's bedside radio. I didn't say anything about the lights being off because I knew this was a certain ritual between us. She liked to talk in this semi-darkness.

"Did you get a chance to talk to Dave?" she asked me.

"About what?"

She looked down at the table and shrugged. This was what she wanted to talk about then, what she had meant on the phone.

"We had the chance," I continued, "but we didn't talk much. He was too busy with the TV."

"I know. That's what he does. I'll tell you, if he doesn't get a coaching job I don't know what. He'll just sit around in front of the TV all day and drink."

"Is he drinking a lot?" It seemed like a ridiculous question in light of the circumstances of finding him in the car, but I was curious what she knew.

"Well, that's what everyone says. He always drinks George's beer when he's here. You know he just can't have one or two."

I nodded. "Who's everyone?"

"Well, your sister. Beth says that Michelle has called her a couple of times saying Dave is gone and she doesn't know where he is. She says some nights he'll go out and won't come back until late the next night." Her voice had lowered to a whisper. "Sometimes when he drinks he's like a different person."

"Like how?"

"One night a couple months ago when he was here, he just turned the stereo on and started dancing. Right in front of the TV while dad and I were watching it." Her face held an expression of incredulousness and I felt a tinge of anger.

"What do you mean dancing?" I asked trying to picture it.

"You know." She stirred her hand on the table. "Spinning around and stuff. Michelle was so embarrassed she went into the other room."

"What did you do?"

"Well, it was funny. Obviously he was drunk, but he really thought he was having a good time. You should see him dance. We laughed. He tried to get me out there." She covered her mouth with her hand.

"Mom, it sounds pathetic."

She dropped her hand from her mouth and shrugged.

"Haven't you ever said anything?" I asked.

"Oh no," she said sitting back. "He gets real angry. Once, George tried to talk to him and it turned into a real shouting match. He just walked out and drove away. You can't talk to him."

"But doesn't his going out all night worry you?"

"What can we do? We can't lock him up or make him go get help." She leaned forward again, whispering. "I think there's a problem between those two. I think she thinks he's seeing someone else. But it's probably more, too."

"I wonder why they stay together."

"I know." She nodded her head severely and spoke in normal tones.

"She really is too good for him. Maybe you should talk to him."

"Me? He wouldn't listen to me. He's the older brother, remember. He already knows everything I could possibly tell him."

"He respects you. He probably feels a little intimidated. I think he feels since you were the youngest you got more attention and so we loved you more. And you've always gotten good grades in school. He knows you're smart."

I got up from the table and went to the sink to wash out my bowl. I couldn't determine if she really thought I could help or if she was just afraid to do it herself. Not for the first time I regretted not telling them about finding him in his car.

"It won't matter what I say," I said. "Maybe something bad has to happen to him." I turned around and looked at her. "You know what I mean? Something that will wake him up."

She raised her eyebrows and shrugged. She was wearing her pink bathrobe. I thought of she and Dave shouting at each other or maybe her trying to hit him with the wooden spoon like she used to do when we were kids and misbehaved. I didn't feel like I could be any more effective.

"Good ice-cream, isn't it?" she asked. "Your father likes to buy the cheap kind, but I like that gourmet ice-cream."

\* \* \*

I pulled into Roger and Michelle's apartment building a little early for dinner. Michelle answered my knock welcoming me in and immediately returning to the kitchen.

"What are you making?" I asked.

"Just chicken and rice," she said smiling. Her hair was tied back into a pony tail. "Roger's in the other room."

I walked through the kitchen into the living room where Roger sat reading the newspaper with both the TV and stereo on.

He saw me and shut off the stereo.

The apartment was bare with pieces of mismatched furniture; cast-offs from both their parents. An entertainment center sat along the wall holding the TV and older model stereo. Sliding glass doors led to a tiny deck. We were on the second floor.

"When do you have to take off?" he asked.

"I don't know. I've got about three hours of driving ahead of me, but I don't mind driving late."

"Let me get you a beer then."

I would have said no, trying to influence through abstinence, but two empties already sat on the table. Besides, I reasoned, maybe the best way to talk to him was by first making a concession.

He came back with a beer for me and for himself. I sat at one end of the couch and he at the other.

I held up the beer he had given me and said, "Actually, mom wanted me to talk to you about this very thing."

He raised his eyebrows. "About what?"

"They're worried you've been drinking a lot," I said in a neutral voice.

He scowled and rubbed his eyes, "Man," he said and looked at me to see if I was serious, "you know how both mom and dad are. They're paranoid. Christ, if you have two beers, you're drunk."

"Well," I said glancing over my shoulder to make sure Michelle wasn't nearby, "I did find you passed out in your car."

He sighed, lifting up his baseball hat and scratching his head.

"I mean, I drink too, Rog. Whatever. It would be terrible if it ever became a problem. Do you ever worry about that?"

He stared at the rug. "Come on, Will. I don't need this crap. I've got so much other shit to worry about." He counted off with his fingers, "Michelle is like going bananas over this wedding. I've got some job things coming up and it looks like we're going to move. I don't know how I'm going to pay for that. Plus, I've got to get a new car. It makes me just want to get the hell out of here."

I stared at the rug, too, and nodded. I just knew that if I pursued this it would turn bad. Like my mom, I had no desire to get into a shouting match. Roger and I hadn't been really angry at each other for years and maybe I was worried what would happen if we did.

Michelle came in and stood behind us. "Dinner should be ready in about half an hour," she said. "Did Roger tell you he has to leave after we eat?"

"Yeah, he did," I said.

"Anybody want a gin and tonic? That's what I'm going to have."

I told her I would have one.

"So," I said to Roger, "you're scouting?"

"Actually I'm just going to talk to some kids I saw at camp this summer. I'm doing some recruiting for the University of Minnesota. I know a few people up there and there's a chance I may get an assistant coaching job."

"Great. Does it pay?"

"Not really. It's just a foot in the door. Michelle's been offered a position at one of the University hospital labs. That'd be the real job since it offers benefits and stuff."

Michelle came back in and handed me my drink.

I had another gin and tonic by the time we started eating so I was feeling pretty buzzed. I've always been a lightweight when it comes to drinking. I hoped the food would sober me up, but instead it made me drowsy. Roger, who had been drinking beers steadily since I arrived, appeared fine. After cleaning his plate he stood up and pulled on a light jacket.

"Are you going to be able to drive tonight?" he asked me.

"Sure," I said. "Maybe I'll take a quick nap on your couch first."

"Go right ahead," he said. "You can crash there all night if you need to."

"Yeah," said Michelle who was also showing signs of intoxication, "you better not go. I'll get you a blanket and pillow."

Roger left saying he'd be home late and I sat on the couch with the TV tuned to some black and white movie. Michelle stacked some blankets and a pillow on the back of the couch and then sat next to me holding a fresh drink.

"Did you want another one?" she asked.

"Nope," I said.

"We've got movies, too."

"Nah, this is fine." I didn't know what it was I was watching. I wasn't really all that interested. I regretted drinking as much as I did and reflected how this entire visit had been a miserable failure. Why hadn't I just said no to the beers and been more forceful toward Roger?

"I can't wait to move to the cities," Michelle said.

I looked at her and nodded dumbly. We stared at the TV. A lot of people were going in and out of a room, running into each other, knocking each other down. I guess it was slapstick.

"Can I ask you something?" Michelle said.

"Sure."

"Do you think Roger loves me?"

I turned away from the TV to look at her.

"I was just wondering what you think."

What I think, I repeated in my head. I ran my hands over my face in a gesture I immediately recognized as one I had seen my brother do a hundred



times before. Because I was tipsy I flirted with the truth. Like saying, I have no idea. Instead I managed to say, "Of course he does. Don't you think?"

"I don't know." She set her beer down on the low coffee table and folded her arms beneath her breasts. She stared at the TV. "I never know what to think. He was gone all summer and then when he comes back it's like no big deal. He doesn't even seem happy to be home, to see me."

"It's just hard for him to express," I said, meaning it more to make her feel better than to defend Roger.

"I know," she said. "And he can be really sweet. But not lately. And not for a while. It makes this wedding feel more and more bizarre. I don't even know what I feel anymore."

She looked over at me and smiled sadly. "I should have had you come up more so we could visit. Then I wouldn't have been so lonely."

"Yeah," I said.

"Probably would have been boring for you."

"No. I like visiting with you. It's good to see you again."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

We looked at each other and then laughed a little.

"Maybe I will have another beer," I said. "Since I'm not going anywhere tonight."

She pushed me back down as soon as I started to get up. "I'll get it," she said.

I heard her open the fridge and she turned off the remaining lights as she came back in so all we had to see by was the muted light of the TV. She came

and stood next to me not holding the beer out, but keeping it at her side. She stood very close and looked down at me. She had undone her hair and it hung down around her face.

"Do you think I'm attractive?" she asked.

I felt my heart skip and the blood rush to my face. She leaned forward pressing her thigh against my hand on the armrest.

"Yes," I said thickly.

She set the beer down on the table and then lifted one of my hands and placed it on her hip. My skin must have felt hot.

"Sometimes," she said, "I feel like you're the only one I know."

I couldn't speak. Suddenly I was both nervous and excited. I exerted some pressure, feeling her hip, my hand sliding around to feel the smoothness of her rear. She turned sideways and sat on my lap putting her arms around my neck. Her face came close to mine and all I could see were the whites of her eyes.

We sat that way for a while, until I felt my leg going numb from her weight. Then we kissed, I'm not sure if I started it or she did, and I felt her tongue, smelled the gin on her breath. Her lips were soft. A moment of terror passed when I imagined Roger noticing their softness, too. But then, as if sensing my hesitancy, she became almost frantic, making little noises, fueling my desire. I slid her backward onto the couch lying on top of her. We began kissing harder and she wrapped her legs around my waist, pushing her pelvis against me. I slipped my hand beneath her, up the back of her shirt to the clasp of her bra. And then I noticed a wetness on my nose and tasted salt. She was crying.

Immediately I pulled back though she tried to cling to me. Gently, I pushed her back onto the couch. I sat up and then stood then sat back down again. I wanted to run out of there. Michelle still lay, now with her hands covering her face while her stomach convulsed in sobs.

She worked her way into the corner of the couch and propped herself up. She held her head in her hands and said bitterly, "Do you feel guilty?"

I looked away and didn't answer her. After a moment she got up and went into their bedroom closing the door. I turned off the TV and sat in the dark. I was filled with self-hate and disgust. All I wanted to do was get out of there. What a fuck-up I was. And all along I'd been kidding myself that I was interested in the truth.

I scribbled a note and put it on the dining-room table thanking them for dinner and saying I'd see them soon. Though I still felt a little dizzy, I made it out to my car and left.

\* \* \*

A month later, in October, I came home again. The wedding was being held in Spruce. I put it off as long as possible showing up the day of the rehearsal, feeling nervous. I had not spoken with Dave or Michelle since that night. Dave gave me a sheepish smile when I entered the church and Michelle, who was busy talking to the pastor, gave a little wave.

Dave directed me into the empty chapel and we sat in the first row of pews. Someone had already started putting up flowers; they lined the windows and flanked the aisle.

"Looks good," I said.

"Michelle planned everything." He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees.

"You nervous?" I asked.

"Nah," he rubbed his unshaven chin. "I wanted to talk to you for a second."

I looked up into the high dark ceiling and wondered what Michelle had said to him. In a way I was glad. I hadn't been able to get that night out of my mind. I kept replaying it over and over again. This was my chance to get it off my chest, out into the open.

He didn't look at me as he spoke. "Thanks for coming."

"Sure, I mean, you are getting married, right?"

"Yeah, well, anyway." He leaned back and folded his arms across his chest. "I was thinking once Michelle and I get settled maybe you should come up and visit us or something. You know, when you're not taking classes or anything. I was just thinking how little we see each other."

"Sure," I said swallowing, "maybe I'll do that."

"Well, whatever." He smiled and laughed a little. "It's just good to have someone here who isn't climbing all over me. God, this wedding is driving me crazy." He looked at me still grinning.

My face felt made of wood. "I bet you're busy."

"Michelle's done all the work. Still, it's been a hassle. All this and we'll probably just get divorced in a year." He elbowed me and I somehow managed to laugh. That was all he wanted to say. That he wanted to see me more.

We sat there a moment listening to people in the other parts of the church talking, moving chairs around, tinkering on the piano. My dad came

down the aisle saying, "There you guys are." He stood at the end of the pew.  
"Michelle wants to talk to you, Roger."

He sighed and stood up saying, "I suppose," and walked out of the chapel.

"You made it," dad said to me.

I nodded.

"Boy, I envy those kids," he said.

I looked at him and he was smiling down on me. It was like the smile of somebody watching an amusing movie or play.

\* \* \*

That night I stood in my parent's bathroom brushing my teeth before going to bed. Mom came in and stood next to me.

"Have you thought about your toast for the reception?" she asked.

"A little," I mumbled spitting out toothpaste. "Are people expecting a speech or something?"

"No. I was just wondering what you were going to say."

"The usual. Good luck and all that."

"You should see the way Michelle's organized this thing."

"I know. She's really going all out, isn't she?"

"Did they tell you she's pregnant?"

I stopped brushing my teeth.

My mom pursed her lips and then nodded her head. "They just found out. I think this baby will straighten him out. You can't screw around when you have a kid to take care of."

"Mom, that's bullshit. They have no business having a baby."

She shrugged and picked up a brush and ran it through her hair. "Oh, I don't know. I think this is what Michelle wanted."

"It's still a bad idea. It's like you and dad."

She stopped brushing and turned towards me. "What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing. Look out." I brushed past her into the kitchen to get a glass of water. She followed me.

"Did you ever get a chance to talk to him last time you were home? I forgot to ask."

"Yeah," I said not turning around from the sink. Outside beneath the street lamp, a skunk crossed the road. "He admitted to everything."

"What?"

"Yeah, he said he was an alcoholic and a fornicator." I took another drink of water to cover up my laugh.

She stepped towards me. "A what? What did he say?"

I turned around and stared into her puzzled face.

"He's a drug addict too, mom. That's where all his money goes. And he's got a girlfriend. She's a teenager." I let out a big guffaw. I couldn't help it.

My mother's body relaxed, though her face hardened. "Will, honestly. You didn't talk to him."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Oh, the TV was on. We were drunk."

She let out a disgusted sigh and turned away.

I turned around, too, watching her in the dark reflection of the window.  
"It all has to do with stuff I can't figure out, mom. Love, truth—" and I meant to say more, but I couldn't because I thought I was going to cry.

## COLD WATER

Zack stared at the dark eyes of the woman in the magazine and wondered if she was real. As always he felt ashamed and knew that what he wanted was something more than just a sexual encounter. At fourteen, love was a hazy and somewhat frightening concept for Zack. How could you love someone and still have sex with them? His idea of a girlfriend meant someone who wanted the same things as he did. Someone who was just like him. The whole sex things seemed dirty and unwholesome.

This was the track his mind usually took after masturbating. He stood in the center of the largest room of his parent's basement holding a Cosmopolitan magazine, shorts around his ankles, and listened to the footfalls of his parents above him. He pulled up his shorts, sat on an old discarded couch, and stared at the picture which had aroused him so much just minutes ago.

The woman smiled seductively out of the small picture with a suggestiveness and desire easily triggering Zack's imagination. Desire, he knew, was something he did not have a hold on. If anything, he could not make himself quit masturbating. In this post-climactic stage he usually reflected upon finding his mother's old Cosmopolitan as a curse. He did not care about the articles on health, fashion, or sexual performance that seemed to take up the bulk of the magazine. He preferred to flip to the back where among the fine print of ads and personals he found scantily dressed women selling various



erotica. He stared at these grainy pictures so long they gained a reality of their own. Sometimes he wondered if what he saw was really in the pictures or if through his imagination he enhanced what he saw in their faces and figures.

It wasn't just the magazines. Nearly every woman he encountered that summer took part in a sexual fantasy. Riding around town on his bike he stared at the stockinged legs of the women coming out of the bank. In the IGA, buying a candy bar, he kept his eyes on the cashier's breasts while she counted out his change. Women, he rationally understood he would later find plain or even too old, assumed erotic qualities. The fantasies and the presence of the increasingly worn Cosmopolitan were like a whirlpool pulling him down into the musty basement.

Sometimes it was even hard for him to be around Lucy, his best friend. Lucy was three and a half years older and only recently had he begun to see her as more than the tomboy everyone said she was. Zack began noticing her breasts. Filled with guilt and longing his eyes fell on her rear every chance he got. She was pretty, he thought, but in a plain sort of way. Not at all like the women in the magazine. But Zack had no illusions about Lucy being his dream girl. Even with the breasts she was too much like a boy. And if Lucy caught him staring at her, she'd probably haul off and hit him. He'd been hit by her before and it was no joke. He knew why no boys tried to mess around with her.

Just after coming up from the basement, he gave Lucy a call. This was the best time to see her, now that he had purged himself and would not have to worry about his awful lust taking over. He was hoping to resume the Dungeons and Dragons game they had been playing along with Stevie, Lucy's cousin who was only in sixth grade, but was an OK kid to have around.

Lucy was always home. Her father, Mr. Pearce, had muscular dystrophy and required constant attention. Polimyascitis, Lucy called it. Something that attacked and destroyed some muscles while leaving others alone. Most of Mr. Pearce's external muscles were still functional allowing him to hold things, or to sit up in a chair. But he could not walk nor could he support his head. It was his internal muscles that bothered him the most; his stomach and esophagus. He ate baby food or something as easily digestible.

On the phone, Lucy told Zack to come on over so he hopped on his ten-speed and coasted down the steep hill to her house. Usually he could make it the whole way without even pedaling. He walked around back and up the wheelchair ramp, knocking before letting himself in.

"Well, hello there!" Lucy's mother shouted from the kitchen. She always sounded as if it was a big surprise to see him come through the door. Cinnamon rolls and numerous cookie sheets laden with pale mounds of dough covered every available flat surface. She limped towards Zack and held out flour covered hands to hug him. Zack hastened to her not wanting her to walk any further than she had to on her arthritic legs.

"We haven't seen you all week," she said squeezing him. Zack loved how she smelled like a bakery.

"I've been roaming around," he said into her shoulder.

"Where can you roam around here?" She laughed and gingerly stepped back to the stove. She was the most jovial person Zack knew, but he often wondered how Lucy's parents could be so old.

"Lucy's in the other room giving Hank a massage," she told him though he could see into the TV room himself from where he was.

Lucy knelt at the base of her father's hydraulic easy chair, vigorously rubbing his pale feet.

"Hey," she said without turning around.

"Hi," he said and then, "Hello Mr. Pearce."

Mr. Pearce's hunched frame did not move, but Zack saw his heavy-lidded eyes shift towards him and blink in acknowledgment. Zack sat down on the couch opposite and watched as Lucy worked her way up Mr. Pearce's ankles and calves. His eyes opened and closed as she rubbed. His hair was gone except for a few strands along the sides. His wet lower lip drooped slightly and when he coughed he wiped at it with a yellow tissue. Above his chair was a painting of a man fishing in a stream. It had the signature of Mike, the oldest son, and Zack knew it was supposed to be of Mr. Pearce. He'd seen it often enough, but he stood up and went to the side of Mr. Pearce's chair to get a better look. Beside it were the three graduation pictures of the sons and below them was Lucy. All the sons were living in different states now, Lucy the only one still at home. There was also a black and white wedding picture where impossible versions of Lucy's parents stood upon the steps of a church. They were smiling and Zack thought how they must never have guessed how things would turn out.

Lucy stood up and placed her hands on her father's shoulders, her cheek against his.

"Tired papa?" she asked.

She picked a control pad off the armrest, a thick cord ran from it to the back of the chair. Pushing a button, the seat came forward while the back reclined. She put a pillow beneath his head then turned on the TV bolted to the

ceiling. Covering his feet and legs with a plaid blanket she set the remote control in his lap next to his left hand.

"Come on," she said to Zack motioning him out of the room.

As always, on the way out he reached up and touched the stuffed fish above the entryway for luck.

They went into her bedroom and she flopped down into an armchair next to her bed. Zack remained standing looking at her old horror movie posters and the books upon her shelves.

"So what's up?" she asked him.

He shrugged. "Not much. I was thinking maybe we could call Stevie and finish that D and D game."

"Hey, look at this," she said jumping up out of the chair. She opened her closet and pulled out a large brown paper bag. Reaching in she brought out a handful of firecrackers.

"Wow," Zack said moving towards the bag, "where'd you get those?"

She held the bag open for him and he saw bundles of firecrackers, bottle-rockets, roman candles, and other miscellaneous fireworks all wrapped in brightly colored paper.

"Mike got 'em for me last time he came home from Missouri."

"Are you going to save them for the fourth?"

"Hell no," she dumped the bag onto the bed. "He'll bring me more then, too."

Zack sat and ran his fingers through the illegal booty. They gave off a bitter gunpowder smell and their fuses left a silver residue on his fingertips.

"You know what I think we should do?" she asked and then didn't wait for Zack to answer. "We should light these off under Charly's patrol car."

Zack laughed. "Right, and get arrested."

"There's no way he could catch us. He's too fat and stupid. You're the one always complaining how we need to get some excitement in this town."

"Yeah, but--"

"Come on," she pleaded. "Let's do something fun for once. Take a chance."

He picked up a bottle-rocket and said, "Can we shoot some of these?"

"Sure. Come on down tonight, around midnight. We'll get him while he's nappin'."

Lucy took the rocket from him and scooped the fireworks back into the bag. Zack stood up and went to one of the many piles of comic books stacked along the base of her walls. He picked up the top comic, a Fantastic Four that he had, and placed it back on the pile. On her window-sill sat a glass aquarium with a screen over the top. It was empty of water, but held sand and a few rocks and some clumps of brush. Zack knelt down trying to spot Harry. Once he let her put Harry in his palm. Zack felt a weight in his hand, but he did not feel the spider specifically. It just sat there and Zack thought maybe Harry was OK for a tarantula. But then it began crawling up the inside of his arm and though Zack wanted to retain his courage in front of Lucy, his cheeks puffed out further and further with each little prickly step of Harry's legs. Before the shout could escape him, Lucy had scooped Harry off. He was nowhere in sight today although there were plenty of the dried, black husks of crickets littering the sandy bottom.

"So are we going to play Dungeons and Dragons today?" Zack asked, straightening up.

Lucy sat in the chair again with her feet up on the bed. "No, I've got to do some stuff around the house."

"Like what?"

She counted off on her fingers, "Like laundry, delivering mom's rolls to the church, helping her clean up, making sure she takes her pills on time, feeding dad, watching him while mom rests."

Zack frowned.

Lucy sighed. "I bet you don't even ever have to do your own laundry."

"So?" Zack sat on the bed by Lucy's feet.

"So, papa hasn't been feeling too good lately and we've got to keep an eye on him. Last night I had to sit up and watch him sleep so his head wouldn't slide off his pillow where he could suffocate. Mom's pills knock her out. She'd never hear a thing."

Zack nodded absently and looked at her stockinged foot next to his thigh. She was flexing her toes.

"Hello," she snapped her fingers at him. "Earth to Zack."

"I was just wondering when we're going to get to play," he said. He could feel his mind turning towards lustful thoughts. "It's been awhile."

Lucy closed her eyes and sighed. "I don't always have time for that shit. I'm starting to feel guilty just thinking about going out tonight."

Zack shrugged. "It's up to you."

"I know. I haven't been out the house for the last three days." Her face softened and she laughed. "Maybe I should get a beeper."

"How come your brothers don't ever watch him?"

"Who's that going to be? They're never around." She shook her head.

"Besides, papa wouldn't like it. They don't know how to move him right. I've been doing it since I was ten."

Zack found himself staring at her foot again and without recalling any conscious decision saw that he had put his hand on her ankle.

"What the hell are you doing?" she asked abruptly, kicking her leg away.

Zack stood up instantly putting the offending hand in his pocket. He felt his face burning. He nodded towards her window. "You want to go biking around a little bit?"

Lucy gave him a puzzled look. "OK." Her face went blank and she stood up moving close to him leaning forward so their noses almost met. Then she put her hands on his chest and shoved him so that with one of his hands trapped in his pockets he fell backward onto her bed then onto the floor.

\* \* \*

Zack had mixed feelings about being seen with Lucy. He had two groups of friends; the guys in his class and Lucy and Stevie. His other friends didn't know how much he hung around Lucy and that was just as well. They'd get the wrong idea. Tease him, maybe even begin thinking he was a nerd. A lot of people thought Lucy was a nerd. Or at the very least that she was weird. In school she was always a loner, never in any school activities. She graduated Valedictorian in her class of fifty and in her commencement speech she quoted Shakespeare. All the other students rolled their eyes. But Zack loved many of the same things she did, things his other friends showed no interest in.

They biked a half mile out of town to the river parking their bikes next to the bridge. Standing upon the cement shelf they leaned over the railing and dropped pebbles into the brown water.

"What if that was chocolate?" Zack asked.

"Then it'd be dirty chocolate."

"You weren't much of a Willy Wonka fan were you?"

"That river is so ugly. I tubed down it last summer and the water stunk."

Cars whizzed past behind them. Someone honked, startling them.

"God, I hate people," Lucy said. "I hate this town."

"Well, get out of here then. At least you have a driver's license."

"Where would I go?"

"I don't know." He reached down and picked up a rock. "I wish I was older."

"What for?" She gave him a sly look and nudged him with her elbow. "So you could be my boyfriend?"

Zack threw the rock. "Get out of here."

"I know that's what it is."

"You're crazy."

"Why is your face all red then?"

He ignored her.

"Well," she said, "I told you. No boyfriends for me. I want to live alone. Have a house all to myself. In fact I'm going to build my own house. I've already been drawing up plans."



"Sounds great," Zack said blandly. "I'm sure you and your spider will be very happy together." He picked up another rock. "Did your dad ever fish this river?"

"This?" Lucy leaned out and spit into the water. "No, he fished trout streams mainly. The only thing worth catching here is catfish. Mudcat. I remember when I was real little and we'd go fishing for trout. He started taking me because his legs would go out on him, mainly his knees and you could never tell when it was going to happen. He'd been diagnosed years before, but Papa's so stubborn, he went fishing anyway. He didn't like taking me at first, but he needed my help most of the time. I was probably ten or eleven."

"How come none of your brothers went?"

"Too much trouble. They would have made too much noise. They aren't fishermen like papa. He liked to fish alone. I was just lucky." She smiled. "I don't know if I'd know him so well if I hadn't got to go along." She leaned forward, resting her elbows on the bridge's railing. "The water in those streams was always so cold. Sometimes I'd have to stand on a rock and just watch because my feet were going numb. He could fish for a long time."

Pigeons flew out from beneath the bridge and they watched them.

Lucy glanced at her watch. "We should get going. It's almost lunch time for papa."

"Come on," Zack said jumping down onto the road, "I'll race you to your back door."

Lucy ran ahead of him, kicked his bike over and was already pedaling down the road before he could get going.

\* \* \*

Zack spent the evening at home with his parents, watching TV and waiting for them to go to bed. At midnight he sneaked out and hopped on his bike. All the lights were on at Lucy's house and through the kitchen window he saw her mom washing dishes. Lucy was sitting outside, next to the wheelchair ramp.

"Is it OK to go?" he asked her.

"Yeah, but I've got to be back soon. Mom's medication has her up weird hours so she's doing more baking for the church. She'll have to go to bed soon and I better be back by then."

They went down the driveway, gravel crunching beneath their feet. The air was cool and they could see their breath. Both of them wore windbreakers and jeans. Lucy's long hair was pulled back into a pony-tail. Her skin was pale and luminous beneath the buzzing streetlights.

When they reached what served as downtown for Spruce, they found the streets empty. Standing on the main corner they heard the clock above the bank click as its digital readout changed.

"Let's go climb the roof of the laundromat," she said. "I don't even think Charly's out tonight."

They went down an alley behind the laundromat which was one of the lower buildings. It sloped downward from the front so that the back was only eight feet off the ground. Next door was the back of the IGA with empty crates strewn around the loading bay. Zack grabbed three of these and stacked them underneath the laundromat's low roof. He held them steady while Lucy climbed.

The roof was springy to their step resembling cracked black rubber. They always used this roof as a starting point for an entire circuit of the rooftops of town.

"Let's get on top of the drugstore," she said.

The drugstore was the highest building next to the bank, but they were afraid to climb the bank because of possible alarms. They crossed the roof of the laundromat onto the roof of the IGA and then the post office which was slightly higher and would lead them to the drugstore. The town was absolutely still. The only noises they heard were the hums of different vents and fans as they passed them. They made a small leap onto the back end of the drugstore then had to shimmy up two drainpipes to get to the higher, front part of the building. They crouched down and looked upon the very center of Main street.

"Doesn't this town look fake?" Lucy asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Like it's a set or something. A gigantic model. It's so dead. There's no sign of life."

Zack looked up and down the street. He guessed he knew what she meant.

"We should just light some sparklers," she said, "hold them over our heads and run down the middle of the street screaming."

"Sparklers are boring."

"This would be cool, though."

Zack didn't think so. He was full of the nervous energy brought on by doing something illegal.

"So what are we going to do? Charly's not around."

"Here," she said and from within her jacket she pulled out some bottle-rockets, all bundled together. "I wound an extra long fuse around them so we could light 'em off all at once."

"All at the same time?" It seemed like a waste to Zack.

"I'll light 'em and you toss 'em down into the street."

She handed him the bundle and took a packet of matches out of her pocket.

"Anybody coming?" she asked.

Zack looked out over the town. Out in the distance, still in the country, but coming towards town, he saw a pair of headlights.

"Wait," he said, but Lucy had already struck the match and put it beneath the fuse.

Zack held the smoking bundle away from his body as if it were a live thing.

"Toss it," Lucy urged.

Zack lofted the rockets gently over the ledge into the middle of the street where they bounced and rolled up against the curb.

"Did the fuse go out?" he asked.

"I see smoke."

"Look," he said and pointed to the car that was now coming into town. He was standing now, ready to run.

There was a flash below as sparks flew and rockets began zipping off in different directions. One caught the curb and deflected up into the sky exploding in a little cluster of colored lights.

"Cool," Zack said momentarily forgetting the need to flee.

More rockets bolted across the road smacking into brick store-fronts or spiraling into doorways. The explosions seemed incredibly loud in the dead night air. One shot straight down the middle of the street and skidded two blocks before exploding. The car, coming from that direction had stopped.

"C'mon," Lucy said pulling at his sleeve.

They laughed nervously as they ran, sliding down the drain pipes, jumping from building to building and listening to the loud reports of the fireworks. They sat down on the edge of the laundromat and leapt to the pavement, roughly tossing the crates back to where they had found them. two blocks short of Lucy's, they had to pull up behind a house and watch as Charly slowly drove by in his patrol car. It was dark inside except for the glowing tip of his cigar.

"There he goes," Zack whispered. "Smoking his dog turd."

They crept home without seeing anyone else.

\* \* \*

Zack had a difficult time falling asleep that night. As he lay in bed he found himself fantasizing about Lucy. In his imaginary scene they were up on the rooftop again only she was taking her clothes off. She was different in his fantasy. She was more sly and seductive. When she spoke it was a whisper. She told him she wanted to make love to him. Her face held the sleepy seductive languor of the woman in the Cosmopolitan. And then it was her and not Lucy at all.

Later the next day Lucy called asking him if he wanted to come down. It wasn't until he had said he would that he remembered the previous night's

fantasy. He was embarrassed just recalling it. He hoped he would be able to act like it never happened.

\* \* \*

When he entered the house Lucy was not there. Her mother spoke to him from her bedroom where she was lying down.

"She just ran down to the store!" Mrs. Pearce called to him. "Help yourself to some rolls and juice in the fridge!"

Zack went into the TV room and sat down on the couch. Mr. Pearce sat in his chair with an open book on a tray before him. His head bobbed the slightest fraction at Zack's entrance.

"Hello Mr. Pearce," he said.

Mr. Pearce coughed and slowly brought a yellow tissue to his mouth. His shaking hand deposited the tissue in a wastebasket brimming with them. He had reached the end of a page and had brought his hand forward again, pawing at the page to turn it. Zack's instinct was to step forward and turn the page for him, but he thought better of it. Mr. Pearce might not like that. For some reason, he only let Lucy or Mrs. Pearce help him. Maybe he was too proud, Zack thought. He sat still and watched Mr. Pearce's agonizingly slow process of getting to the next page.

Finally, Lucy came home carrying a paper bag of groceries.

"Sorry," she said when she saw him. "I thought I could do this before you came."

He got up and helped her put the food away.

She shut the refrigerator door and said, "I was thinking we should go see that Godzilla film festival playing in Rochester."

Zack sat at the kitchen table. "I hate Godzilla."

"It'd be good for a few laughs."

"Nah," he said, "you go ahead if you want."

Lucy leaned her back against the fridge. "I don't want to go alone. That wouldn't be fun."

"Take Stevie."

"Forget it." She walked past him into the TV room. He got up and followed her. She sat on the couch looking at the TV guide. He felt bad for turning her down.

"You want to play Yahtzee?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Sure."

Her father made a coughing sound and raised a finger.

"Oh no," she said sighing and rolling her eyes in mock dread. "Looks like the Yahtzee King himself wants to play."

\* \* \*

The next couple of days were particularly hot and Zack spent them with his other friends at the swimming pool. Lying out on blankets he and his friends watched the girls from behind sunglasses. He listened to the way his friends talked and wondered if any of them had had sex. Were they looking at magazines and masturbating like he was? He had the feeling he was behind and these guys had been jerking off for years.

In the evenings he tried calling Lucy, but there was never an answer. He still found himself fantasizing about her. Sometimes it bothered him and other times it didn't. When he biked past her driveway there were no cars. He thought perhaps they were off visiting relatives. Then one morning as he was

pedaling down to the IGA he went past Lucy's house and saw their truck in the driveway. The truck had a triangular arm on the top of the cab that swung out. It was electric and was what they used to get Mr. Pearce from the wheelchair to the cab of the truck.

When he knocked on the door Lucy came and opened it for him and without saying a word retreated back into the house.

He followed her immediately sensing something wrong. "What's up?" he asked. The house was empty except for the two of them.

She sat down at the kitchen table. All the blinds and curtains were drawn. "Oh, just the usual," she said tiredly without looking at him.

She was wearing cut-offs and sandals, a twist of string around one ankle. Her white muscle shirt sagged when she sat and gave Zack a glimpse of the white skin of her breast. She wasn't wearing a bra.

Zack sat down opposite her. She ran her hands up the side of her face then back over her head smoothing down her hair.

"Papa's in the hospital," she said and smiled. It was a humorless smile and Zack guessed she had not been sleeping much. "Mom's staying with him for a while."

"What's wrong?"

"Well, he's dying isn't he?" She put her hands together on the table in front of her. "I mean, slowly that's what's been happening to him all this time."

Zack didn't know what to say. He stared at her ankle and guiltily felt himself becoming aroused. He knew it was inappropriate to be thinking these thought, but he couldn't stop himself.



She stood up and went to the sink pouring herself a glass of water.

"Do you want anything to drink?" she asked without turning around.

"No," he said looking at her butt, the frayed strings hanging off the ragged ends of the shorts. He looked away, then back again.

She drank and started coughing. With both hands down on either side of the sink she coughed into the basin. Zack stood up and patted her on the back like his mom always did for him. She held up her hand for him to stop and seemed to be holding her breath. Her eyes were shut and her mouth was clamped tight. Then she turned and put her arms around him her face in his shoulder.

He hugged her back, feeling her breasts against his chest. He almost pulled away, afraid she would feel him through her shorts but it felt like she was leaning into him. They stood that way for a while and he could not even tell if she was breathing. When she pulled away she stayed close to him, her breath falling across his face. With his heart pounding in his ears, he leaned forward and kissed her on the lips.

Lucy reacted as if she had been hit with an electric shock, violently shoving Zack away and backing up.

She covered her face and began to cry. "What the hell did you do that for?" she wailed.

Zack stood totally still, feeling his body go stiff, his feet become part of the floor. A wave of nausea fluttered upward from his stomach.

"Huh?" she demanded. She was looking at him now, her hands on her hips. Her eyes were red and washed out. The silence stretched as they stared at each other.

"I don't know," he said finally.

"My dad is dying!" She thrust her face at him. "What is going on in your head? Why aren't you trying to help me?"

Zack took a wooden step forward extending his hand, not even sure what he was going to do.

"No," she said stepping around him. "You better go. You don't understand." She folded her arms across her chest. "You don't know what it's like."

She shook her head and was unable to speak for a moment. "You know, every time we do something, biking around or hanging out with Stevie, I have to say good-bye to my dad. I have to tell him I love him every time." She laughed bitterly and wiped at her nose with the back of her hand. "God, I am so sick of people asking me about college and my future. What do you think about my future?"

Zack shrugged and said meekly, "I thought you were maybe going to wait a while or something."

"Do you know how much I hate this town, this place?" she challenged. "What would I be waiting for?" She held up a finger. "One thing. And it's happening right now. Christ Zack, I'm always waiting. And I can't even be glad when the waiting's over because it'll mean my dad is dead." She covered her eyes and began crying again. Then she turned around and went into her bedroom slamming the door.

Zack went up to the door but could not think of anything to say. He knocked and listened for a moment almost hoping she wouldn't respond. When she didn't he turned and left. He didn't know when he'd be able to come back.

\* \* \*

He stayed around his house for two days, not calling anyone or doing much of anything. Most of the time he watched TV, re-read some of his comics, or slept.

On the second day he sat in the cool basement and looked at the Cosmopolitan magazine. He wondered if there was something wrong with him. He did not know how he could separate his feelings of desire and friendship. He thought again of love and that vague image he had of the perfect girl. Hadn't Lucy ever wanted a boyfriend? All her brothers were married. He pictured their graduation pictures, then Lucy massaging her father's legs. He thought of her sitting beside her father's bed watching him sleep. How would he ever be able to face her again?

That same day she called.

"It's me," was all she said.

Zack wanted to apologize immediately, but everything sounded so stupid and embarrassing in his head.

The silence stretched on and on and just when he became worried that she would hang up she said, "Papa's still in the hospital, but he's OK now."

"He is? That's great."

"They had to fix his breathing."

"What did they do?"

"They put a hole in his throat with a tube in it."

In the silence following her heard her give a sharp intake of breath and knew she was crying again.

"Lucy," he began, "I'm sorry. I mean, for your dad and for..." his voice trailed off.

"I know," she said.

"You're my best friend." As soon as he said it he felt a wave of warmth come over him. He hadn't felt embarrassed or ashamed to say it. It was true. And he wanted to say more, pile on other things on top of that, tell her everything he could think of that was in him. But he didn't. Lucy went on to tell him that Mike was home for a while now and he and her mother would be bringing papa back the next morning.

She asked Zack to meet her that night on top of the drugstore again. At first, Zack felt uncertain about what was going to happen, but when she said they had some unfinished business to do concerning Charly, he understood. He agreed to meet her there at midnight.

\* \* \*

She wasn't there and Zack wondered if he was early or if something had come up. He stood at the edge of the roof, his knees pressing against the ledge. It was quiet, dead, just like the time before. A wind was blowing, and listening to it whistle through the empty streets he was filled with melancholy. Suddenly there was a loud series of pops or tiny explosions coming from one of the side streets. To his right, one block down, a hooded figure came running around the corner. Zack knew it was Lucy.

She wasn't running very fast and in each hand she held a lit sparkler.

He yelled her name and she looked up waving one of the sparklers. He could hear it hissing and spitting in the wind. Behind her, coming around the

corner and following her down the middle of the street was Charly in his patrol car. He closed in behind her and stayed there as she continued running.

Lucy did not try to dodge up on the sidewalk or go down an alley. She remained in the center of the road, jogging at a leisurely pace, the sparklers held above her head. There was no siren, just the red and blue lights of Charly's car, circling, strobing off the windows and fronts of the buildings.

Like a parade, Zack thought, watching. And he wondered how far Lucy would run. If she would keep going until maybe even Charly would stop, letting her go farther and farther away.